

ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

*BY THE SAME AUTHOR*

PRELUDE

PATCHWORK

SELF

TWENTY-FIVE

CRAZY PAVEMENTS

STAR SPANGLED MANNER

ARE THEY THE SAME  
AT HOME

?

BEING A SERIES OF BOUQUETS  
DIFFIDENTLY DISTRIBUTED

By

BEVERLEY NICHOLS

WITH AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY BY  
THE AUTHOR



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DEDICATED WITH APPROPRIATE SENTIMENTS  
TO  
MY DEAR ENEMY  
THE BARONESS CLIFTON<sup>1</sup>  
IN THE KNOWLEDGE THAT  
ONE OF US SHOULD KNOW BETTER  
AND THAT  
ONE OF US DOES

<sup>1</sup> See page 260

## CONTENTS

### I

SEÑORITA DE ALVAREZ, OR TENNIS WITHOUT TEARS	23
--	----

### II

MICHAEL ARLEN, OR ALL IS NOT GOLD . . .	28
---	----

### III

MISS LILIAN BAYLIS, OR A LESSON FROM THE OLD VIC	33
--	----

### IV

SIR THOMAS BEECHAM, OR A PROPHET WITHOUT MUCH HONOUR	38
---	----

### V

HILAIRE BELLOC, OR IGNORANCE IS BLISS	43
---------------------------------------	----

### VI

ARNOLD BENNETT, OR A GREAT REPORTER	49
-------------------------------------	----

### VII

E. F. BENSON, OR VERY MUCH AT HOME	54
------------------------------------	----

### VIII

LORD BERNERS, OR A ROCOCO BYRON	59
---------------------------------	----

### IX

MISS EDNA BEST, THE WELL-KNOWN NYMPH	64
--------------------------------------	----

### X

SIR JOHN BLAND-SUTTON, BT., OR AN ARTIST WITH A KNIFE	69
--	----

### XI

ANDRÉ CHARLOT, OR LONDON, PARIS, AND NEW YORK	74
--	----

# C O N T E N T S

## XII

SIR ALAN COBHAM, OR SUCH A LITTLE BIRD 80

## XIII

MR. C. B. COCHRAN, OR A BIG NOISE 85

## XIV

DUFF COOPER, M.P., OR A RELIC OF DISRAELI 90

## XV

NOEL COWARD, OR A SLAVE TO VIRTUE 96

## XVI

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE, OR AN UNGRATEFUL  
FATHER 101

## XVII

ALICE DELYSIA, OR SOMETHING OUT OF A NOVEL 106

## XVIII

DIAGHILEFF, OR AN INSPIRED BEACH-COMBER 111

## XIX

SIR GERALD DU MAURIER, OR NOT WHAT YOU THINK 116

## XX

EPSTEIN, OR WHAT IS BEAUTY? 121

## XXI

GEORGE GERSHWIN, OR A DRUNKEN SCHUBERT 126

## XXII

EUGENE GOOSSENS, OR NOT SO COLD AS HE LOOKS 131

## XXIII

PHILIP GUEDALLA, OR THE IMPORTANCE OF WASTE-  
PAPER BASKETS 136

# C O N T E N T S

XXIV	
SACHA GUITRY, OR A MAN OF HONOUR	142
XXV	
SEYMOUR HICKS, OR A SPENDTHRIFT OF GENIUS	147
XXVI	
ANTHONY HOPE, OR ANYTHING BUT SENILE	152
XXVII	
ALDOUS HUXLEY, OR A VERY COLD YOUNG MAN	157
XXVIII	
MARGARET KENNEDY, OR A CERTAIN WILDNESS	162
XXIX	
KOMISARJEVSKY, OR BEHIND THE SCENES	167
XXX	
FATHER RONALD KNOX, OR EVERY OTHER INCH A SAINT	172
XXXI	
LASZLO, OR TWO SORTS OF SUCCESS	177
XXXII	
SIR JOHN LAVERY, OR THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING AN ORPHAN	182
XXXIII	
SUZANNE LENGLEN, OR MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING	187
XXXIV	
LLOYD GEORGE, OR THE WORLD'S SPELL-BINDER	191
XXXV	
W. J. LOCKE, OR AN INTOXICATED ASCETIC	198

# C O N T E N T S

XXXVI	
FREDERICK LONSDALE, OR A MODERN MARCUS AURELIUS	204
XXXVII	
SIR EDWIN LUTYENS, OR AN ARTIST MALGRÉ LUI	209
XXXVIII	
ROSE MACAULAY, OR A CAVE WOMAN	218
XXXIX	
JOHN MCCORMACK, OR SONG, CHAMPAGNE, AND STRIFE	223
XL	
EDDIE MARSH, OR FOR EVER ENGLAND	229
XLI	
CYRIL MAUDE, OR AMIABILITY PERSONIFIED	235
XLII	
W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM, OR DARK AND DIFFICULT	240
XLIII	
MELBA, OR NEVER AGAIN	245
XLIV	
FLORENCE MILLS, OR A LONELY BLACKBIRD	250
XLV	
GEORGE MOORE, OR THE CAUSE OF ALL THE TROUBLE	255
XLVI	
BEVERLEY NICHOLS, OR — WHAT?	260

# C O N T E N T S

## XLVII

DR. CYRIL NORWOOD, OR HUMANIZING HARROW 266

## XLVIII

SEAN O'CASEY, OR A ROUGH DIAMOND 272

## XLIX

SIR WILLIAM ORPEN, OR TEA AND TECHNIQUE 277

## L

SIR ARTHUR PINERO, OR PLUS ÇA CHANGE 282

## LI

SIR LANDON RONALD, OR A LITTLE CRIME 290

## LII

OSBERT SITWELL, OR POETRY AND POSE 295

## LIII

MARIE TEMPEST, OR BECKY WAS AN ARTIST 300

## LIV

EDGAR WALLACE, OR THE BURGLAR'S FRIEND 305

## LV

HUGH WALPOLE, OR SECOND THOUGHTS 310

## LVI

H. G. WELLS, OR MULTUM IN PARVO 316

## LVII

REBECCA WEST, OR A SANGER BORN 321

## LVIII

JIMMIE WHITE, OR HOW TO BE A MILLIONAIRE 326

C O N T E N T S

LIX

MISS ELLEN WILKINSON, M.P., OR A STUDY IN PINK 331

LX

P. G. WODEHOUSE, OR A FEW 'PLUMS' 336

LXI

GEORGES CARPENTIER, OR WHY DO THEY DO IT? 344

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

MR. GEORGE MOORE once gave me this piece of advice: 'Never write a preface. If you do, the critics will review the preface only, and leave the rest of the book untouched.'

This is not a preface but a story, told in order to prove to you that George Moore was speaking truly when he referred to the critics. A few days before our meeting somebody had sent him a review which I had written of his book *Celibate Lives*. He read the review and it interested him. On the strength of it, he asked me to lunch.

I here confess shamelessly that although I reviewed *Celibate Lives*, I had read only a fraction of it. I had read the preface, which enunciated an appealing theory of æsthetics, and I had read two out of about nine of the stories in order to test the truth of that theory. Life, in the shape of a hundred duties and pleasures, prevented me from reading more. But it did not prevent me from writing my review.

So when I went to lunch with him in Ebury Street, here was the scene set for a very pretty comedy—myself at one end of the table, fingering a glass of yellow wine, George Moore at the other end, pink and white, toying with a glass of water, and a parlourmaid hovering in the background with an omelette from which the glory was rapidly departing.

'Which of the stories did you like the best?' crooned Moore.

I closed my eyes for a fraction of a second. In those



days – long, long ago – at least six months past – I was reviewing half a dozen books a week. I did my best with those books. I read them grimly, conscientiously, usually in their entirety. But in how short a time did they fade from my memory! In how short a time did one heroine blend into another, were the features of one hero inseparable from those of the next, did sunlight and starlight and moonlight blend into a universal dusk of oblivion! I remembered Moore's stories better than almost any others. But in these surroundings, with a parlourmaid breathing down my neck, and a pink, inquiring face opposite me, I felt paralysed.

I screwed my eyes more tightly, and then opened them suddenly. 'The one which ends with the song of a blackbird in a garden,' I said. I beamed at Moore triumphantly. I felt like crying out, 'Ah! You couldn't catch *me*! The story about the blackbird *was* in the book, and it was a beautiful story.' I prepared to seize my portion of the omelette.

'Pshaw!' said Moore. 'That was the very slightest of them all. The very slightest story. Strange that you should like that story better than the story about . . .' (I forget what it was about). 'Which other stories did you like?'

I cast a despairing glance at the omelette. The parlourmaid stood there like a waxen image. For her I had no feelings, because, after all, she was not an omelette. She was not something light as air, born for a moment only, to be seized and devoured while the bloom was on her. She was just ordinary flesh and blood, whereas the omelette was a sacred mixture of butter and eggs. I

# A U T H O R ' S N O T E

saw that the omelette was already feeling the strain. It had a sullen look. Its fine, careless rapture was evaporating. It was settling down for the night. And when an omelette settles down for the night . . .

'Which other stories did you like?' repeated Moore. Had there been no omelette in the background he might never have known the truth. As it was, the call of the flesh prevailed over the call of the spirit. I told him that I had only read three stories, that I was sorry about it, but that I should be even sorrier not to do justice to his superb omelette. Honesty triumphed. I ate my omelette to the sound of quiet chuckles from ~~the~~ other end of the table. And some weeks later, after I had written the little essay on him which is printed in a later part of this book, he wrote me the following letter:

121, Ebury Street

S.W.1.

DEAR MR. BEVERLEY NICHOLS,

*I would have written to you yesterday to thank you for your exquisitely written article if I had been able to find your address. — gave it to me last evening, and I take advantage of a moment's respite before post-time to tell you that I do not remember any article that gave me the same æsthetic pleasure as yours.*

*I hope that if you write any more of these articles you will publish them in a book.*

*I am, sincerely yours,*

GEORGE MOORE.

After which I ought, of course, to end by saying

A U T H O R ' S       N O T E

'Mr. Moore's letter affords my only excuse for offering to the Great Public these slight impressions, tossed off in my spare time, of Those Who Have Honoured Me with their Friendship.'

Being truthful I am bound to admit that I should have published them even if George Moore had said that the 'impressions' made him feel sick. There is only one reason why anybody ever publishes a book. And you know it as well as I.

E. N.

I wish to thank the Editor of *The Sketch* for his courtesy in allowing me to reprint material which originally appeared in his pages.



ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?



# I

## SEÑORITA DE ALVAREZ

*or*

### Tennis without Tears

WOMEN tennis players, as a class, appeal neither to my senses nor to my intelligence. They develop either too much muscle or too much temperament. The muscular ones can be ignored, because, as long as they are given an ample quantity of balls, they can be trusted to bounce about without doing anybody much harm, until they pant themselves into middle age, when, presumably, they decorate their childless hearths with a suitable array of silver.

But the temperamental ones cause more trouble than a shipload of *prime donne*. Naming no names, and with no desire to 'cast nasturtiums upon anybody,' as Mrs. Malaprop might have said, I wish to put on record a protest against the habit of treating tennis as though it were a sport for geniuses, in which the champions are expected to have nerves, high blood-pressure, and countless 'moods.' If this sort of thing is allowed to continue, we shall soon see a champion carried screaming from the courts, because her opponent had chosen a more becoming bandeau than her own.

That is why I take off my hat to that charming and decorative player, Señorita de Alvarez. Nobody who has seen her play could possibly accuse her of possess-



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

ing either too much muscle or too much temperament. That is because she is completely *amateur*. She does not, like certain women players I have known, talk tennis, think tennis, dream tennis, surreptitiously practising backhanders as they wend their way up the staircase to bed.

I remember a morning last March, when we sat together on a terrace at Cannes, sipping a cocktail that was as yellow as the sunlight and almost as cold. The fact that she drank a cocktail at all pleased me greatly, for I imagine that Lenglen would regard such a procedure as treachery to the gifts with which ~~Nature~~ Nature has endowed her. And anyway, with Lenglen's 'temperament,' bromide would be a more suitable *apéritif* than gin. As we sipped our cocktail, the Señorita lazily explained her point of view.

'When I was about eight,' she said, 'my father gave me a little tennis racquet, and it seemed that I knew how to use it. I had, I think, about thirteen lessons when I was about twelve, just to show me how to place my arms, and that is all. I've never been really terribly serious about it, because there happen to be a great many things in life besides tennis which amuse me. I love riding, I love ski-ing, I love driving a car, I love playing billiards. So if you think that tennis is the be-all and the end-all of my existence, you're very much mistaken.'

Thank heaven for that! We have heard so much about these champions who are born, so to speak, with a silver tennis racquet in their hands, whose fathers led them out on to squared courts before they were old

enough to know better, that it is refreshing to find a champion who regards the game merely as a game, too precious to be treated as a profession, and not precious enough to become a mania.

'That is why,' she added, 'I get so bored when people meet me and immediately begin to talk tennis to me. I don't want to talk tennis. I hate to be regarded as a sort of machine that only begins to function as soon as it is put on a tennis court. I would far rather talk about the drama, or the ballet, or the weather, or, if the worst comes to the worst, the prospects of the Labour Party.'

I think it is this attitude of detachment which gives her game its peculiar charm. I hold the very old-fashioned (or should I say, the very modern?) heresy that a woman's game should be judged from an æsthetic as well as an athletic standpoint. I have a great many prejudices to air in this book, and I may as well confess immediately that one of my fiercest prejudices is against the average woman athlete. To me there is something a little nauseating in the woman hockey player, for example. Hockey is a hideous game in any case: it leads to swollen ankles, coarse hands, lines about the mouth and anything but a schoolgirl complexion. Tennis, as played by some women, is almost as bad. It ceases to be a dance – a graceful, vague fluttering after an elusive spirit – and it becomes a fetish – a sexless orgy. It also seems to make many women's brains as soft as it makes their muscles hard. But that is another question.

From the æsthetic standpoint, then, the play of

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

Señorita de Alvarez is as perfect as that of Lenglen herself, and she possesses physical attractions into the bargain. The Señorita's game is pictorially exquisite. Her service is as swift and true as the flight of a bird. She runs with a strange, faintly savage grace. In repose her poise is always beautiful.

There is another thing about her which enormously appeals to me. She has not allowed herself to be dehumanized by her game. Ever and anon, while she is playing, little touches of emotion show themselves (*not* temperament, if you please), but the sort of emotion which anybody but a fossil must feel in moments of excitement. They are like flickers of flame about a smouldering fire. She misses a shot, and instead of examining her racquet with a grim curiosity, she cries *là-là*, and makes what I should like to call a *moue*. She brings off a brilliant stroke, and, out of sheer exhilaration, she throws back her head and smiles. One could almost calculate the score by the light and play of her features.

That seems to me a very excellent idea. I may be un-English, un-sporting, un-anything you like, but I have never seen the necessity for preserving this deadly stereotyped calm. It brings a frozen look into the eyes and, I should imagine, would end by developing a pronounced double chin. And the Señorita, though she tries ever so hard, will never be able to attain that frozen look. Nor does she desire to do so.

'I think that sometimes the English crowds must be very bored with us,' she said, 'because they welcome any little thing out of the ordinary. If the umpire

sneezes they sit up and say, 'Ooh! He's sneezed!' and a look of hope comes into their eyes that he may perhaps sneeze again.'

As I nibbled the final scarlet shred of my cherry, I asked her if it was not a most terrifying experience to walk out into the centre court just before the match for the world's championship.

'All those thousands and thousands of eyes – glaring. And the silence. And the bright sunshine. And the umpires, like great cats. . . .'

She shook her head. 'That isn't really the worst part. It's what goes on *before* that really worries me. The telephone calls, the photographers, the messages. . . . Do you know that I don't suppose I slept for more than three hours on any night towards the end of the tournament? It wasn't on account of a guilty conscience, either, because I've been living a most monastic life since I came to London. But I couldn't sleep for all that.'

I like that confession, because it was made after the match and not before. We have been treated recently to so much temperament in tennis. . . . But there, I have said enough about that.

I have also said enough, I trust, to give you some idea of her charm.

## II

MICHAEL ARLEN

*or*

All is not Gold . . .

THERE was once a famous authoress who, when asked if she did not think Michael Arlen 'brilliant,' replied, 'No, Brilliantine.' It was not very nice of her to say that, but then famous female authors seldom are 'nice,' and they are the sort of people who quite obviously detest Mr. Michael Arlen. For, in a way, he is a famous authoress himself, by which I mean that his style is far more feminine than that of most women, while the admirers of that style must number at least ten women to one man.

But though it was not 'nice' of the authoress, I can vaguely understand what she meant by that word brilliantine. In the various long-shots and close-ups of Michael Arlen which remain in my mind there is always a glitter, a kinema radiance, a sense of attendant limelight, even in the broad sunshine that floods the more expensive side of Berkeley Square. On the first occasion when I met him, in a suitable surrounding of sinister Peers and fatigued actresses, the glitter was provided by some exquisite amethyst shirt-studs which I have never ceased to covet. Over those shirt-studs a pale, mocking, but strangely diffident pair of eyes peered at a world which was proving singularly easy to

conquer. And on the last occasion when I saw him, I saw not so much Michael Arlen as the emblem of his triumph. He was sitting in an immense yellow Rolls-Royce that flaunted its pedigree before the servile Renaults and Citroëns in the Rue de Rivoli. I had a momentary vision of the little princes in Oscar Wilde's fairy-stories, staring, pale and wan, from the jewelled richness of the prose with which he surrounded them, as though they would cry, 'Set us free from these exquisite adjectives. Entangle us no longer in a wreath of glittering words. Dispel your mist of precious prose and let us breathe the freshness of God's free air – or at least the comparative freshness of the Champs Élysées.'

The Rolls-Royce, in other words, was very large, and Michael Arlen was on the small side. The Rolls-Royce, too, was the colour of gold; and though the cover of Michael Arlen's latest book makes it look as though it had lain awhile in the pocket of Midas, the contents of the volume do not entirely live up to its exterior. By all of which I mean to imply merely that his position is out of all proportion to his reputation – or should I say his notoriety? I do *not* wish to suggest, as do so many disgruntled reviewers in our excessively silly week-end literary reviews, that he is unworthy of any reputation at all.

He descended from the Rolls-Royce and made his way slowly towards the Ritz bar. Study him as he walks – a small dapper figure, his clothes coming from all the right places, his gloves neatly adjusted, his black slouch hat giving the only touch of Bohemia – or should I say Armenia? – which he permits himself.

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

The whirl of Paris is around him. He has fur inside his coat and money to burn. He has only to wear a new shade of tie for all the gossip-writers in two continents to sharpen their pencils (if not their wits). Somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Rue de Lille there is a flat with every modern convenience and every ancient beauty. And in the immediate future there is the rattle of lemon and ice against gin, and quantities of hot crisp potato chips to be nibbled before a leisurely lunch.

That, I suppose, is Happiness. Yet is it? Michael Arlen never strikes me as a particularly happy man. He is too conscious of his own limitations to be happy – too conscious of the folly of all this fanfare and fuss, of these great head-lines in American papers, of this never-ending tittle-tattle of the ‘by-the-way-I-was-lunching-at-the-Ritz-yesterday’ fraternity. He would have been far happier if he were a more ‘select’ success, if he had a small flat in Mayfair that needed hard work to support, if he occasionally contributed delicately indelicate stories to the more intelligent magazines, if every now and again a book would come out, to receive intelligent reviews in intelligent papers.

Hence the look of the wan fairy prince. Hence, too, I am inclined to think, various strange anomalies in his latest book, *Young Men in Love*. Reading the opening chapter, and remembering certain things which I knew about Arlen, it seemed to me a faintly tragic chapter. For Arlen was very nervous about *Young Men in Love*. He had had, with *The Green Hat*, a reverberating success. It had succeeded and succeeded – and succeeded. That, of course, was delicious. It brought the Rolls-

Royce, and the flat, and all the other things which happen when one is able to turn oneself, as he turned himself in the States, from a mere novelist into 'Michael Arlen incorporated.' But it had its disadvantages. One was raised, was one not, to a pedestal? One's most insignificant paragraph was more important now than one's most hectic chapter in the days gone by. Everybody was waiting – the American publishers were waiting, the flappers were waiting, the gossips were waiting. I remember sitting, during this pregnant period, with Frederick Lonsdale, and hearing the telephone ring. Over the wire came Arlen's voice announcing that he had cut thousands of words out of his new novel. The news, in this tense atmosphere, seemed of vital importance. I wonder if it will seem of such vital importance in twenty years' time? I doubt it. And I am sure that Arlen doubts it too.

You will see how heavily his new importance weighs upon him if you read the opening chapter of *Young Men in Love* in the light of these observations. I can see him as he wrote it – sitting down at a severe desk, conscientious literary artist that he is – saying to himself, a little forlornly, 'I have to do something big. I am a Symbol. I must show that I can Think. I will therefore introduce many resounding Names into my first chapter – the Names of Peace and War, and Lloyd George and Wilson. And, of course, *The Four Horsemen*.'

He has done it – and the result is a little depressing. His political moralizations are not very convincing. He was far happier gambolling about underneath his



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

Green Hat. It is a long time since he said to me, 'I am not a fashion. I'm an international disease.' Well, I must go on being a disease and never attempt to be cured. Mr. H. G. Wells does that so much better.

As I write the news comes that he has set off for Peru. That seems to me a highly significant piece of information. I know nothing about Peru, except, on the authority of Dr. Johnson, that it is a long way from China. I cannot believe, however, that Michael Arlen has found it necessary to retreat to Peru in order to escape from the reverberations of the present Chinese discontents. I prefer to think that he has gone there to start again, to forget all about the gossip writers, to breathe a little fresh air, so that when he returns among us once more we shall all appear as hectic and poisonous as we have evidently appeared to him in the past. It would be so depressing for us all if Michael Arlen ever ceased to be shocked.

### III

MISS LILIAN BAYLIS

*or*

A Lesson from the Old Vic

A MIDDLE-AGED woman in black, with a kindly face, held out a cloak of ruby velvet, letting it dim and sparkle in the sunshine that flooded in from the Waterloo Road. 'That was an old Court train once,' she said. 'To-day it's one of my finest costumes in *Maritana*.'

I wandered with her down the long room, between serried rows of costumes. They hung so still and so quiet that it was difficult to believe that in a few hours some of them would be fluttering and billowing with the ardour of a mimic passion. There were brocades and satins and faded linens, there were bodices and aprons and surcoats, cloaks of purple, tatters of black — all that vast array of properties so vital in the great game of Make Believe.

'Some of these were made up out of old curtains, some from torn sheets, dyed and sewn together — we've even used tablecloths and mantle-borders before now. On the stage some of the most unlikely materials look wonderful.'

She paused, stretched into a dark corner, and pulled out a beautiful dress of claret-coloured velvet and brocade. 'Ellen Terry's,' she said. 'I put young actresses in it.'

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

Now she ought to have said that, I suppose, in a hushed voice, finger to lip, with sentimental reverence. I am glad to record that she did nothing of the sort. The reverence was there all right, but she has no time to be sentimental. She is one of the busiest women I have ever met, and one of the most practical.

Just think for a moment of all that was going on in the 'People's Theatre' while we were looking at those dresses. There was a lighting rehearsal for a Nativity play on the main stage. There was a word rehearsal of another play in one of the back rooms. They were knocking up some additional scenery for *Aida* in the workshop. They were feverishly stitching some new *Faust* costumes in the sewing-rooms. They were preparing for *Macbeth* which was to be given that night, and arrangements were being made that during the performance of *Macbeth* a rehearsal should be held of a new cast for *Madame Butterfly*.

That is not a bad record for a single theatre, and when you remember that Miss Baylis – who was Manager of the Old Vic before I was even born – is the inspirer of all this activity, running here, there and everywhere, making lightning decisions and sudden improvisations, you will agree that she is a remarkable personality.

The chief reason for her success is that she has never known when to say die. This example of the wardrobe alone proves that. When she took over the Old Vic she had no costumes at all. She began by hiring them at the rate of £2 10s. a week. As the theatre extended its repertory, and more and more costumes were necessary,

the weekly bill for dresses became almost prohibitive. There was no capital to buy a wardrobe. What was to be done?

Well – the curtains and the mantle-borders and the old sheets partly solved the problem. But only partly. It was not till a sudden windfall arrived, in the shape of a grant, that she was able to buy the foundations of her own wardrobe. Nor was that the end of it. For the conglomeration of costumes was vast, and she had nowhere to put them. So they were stored in two small empty shops, in piles on the floor. Then a quantity of rats came out of the floor and covered all the costumes with vermin. And she had to begin all over again. And – but you see the idea?

She showed me a very good example of the way in which sheer persistence can remove mountainous difficulties. ‘I want you to come downstairs,’ she said. We passed out of her little office, with its buzzing telephone, its rattle of typewriters, and its cups of tea which were always growing cold because there was no time to drink them. We traversed corridors filled with bustling figures (most of whom addressed Miss Baylis, with a queer mixture of affection and awe, as ‘mother’), and descended a staircase which led on to the stage. During this journey Miss Baylis must have given at least a dozen scattered orders to various people about various jobs. Finally, she found what she had been seeking – a life-size statue of an Egyptian god, leaning against a pile of scenery for *Aida*.

‘There!’ she said.

I looked at the god, and the god looked at me – a

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

little insolently, I thought. He was an imposing creature, with a beautiful head-dress of gold, arrogant lips, and a chest of which anybody would have been proud.

'The only thing about him which I should question are his legs,' I said diffidently.

Miss Baylis achieved something very like a snort. 'You'd be doubtful about your own legs,' she retorted, 'if they were only trousers stuffed with sawdust, covered with tar, helped out with a little papier-maché, and produced at a total cost of fifteen bob, *inclusive* of the rest of you.'

I examined the deity in astonishment. He no longer seemed to be quite so insolent. After all, nobody has any right to be insolent whose legs are merely trousers stuffed with sawdust and tarred. And as I studied his anatomy Miss Baylis explained the birth of him. She had to have a god for *Aida*. It was a bore, because one could not use him in any other opera. Still, he was necessary, and so she sent her henchmen into the highways and byways to find one. Apparently statues of Egyptian deities are not as plentiful in London as they should be, for within two weeks of the opening night all that had been discovered was an immense statue of a negroid tendency, for which the sum of fifteen pounds was demanded. 'Take it away,' cried Miss Baylis. 'I wouldn't give fifteen bob for the thing.'

And thus it came about that the god had to be evolved in the workshop of the Old Vic. I don't know whose was the idea of the stuffed trousers, nor who stuffed them. But I do know that only in the Old Vic could

they have manufactured so superb a god for the sum of fifteen bob.

One could give a hundred other examples of that same sort of resourcefulness which she has been called upon to show, day in and day out, for so many years. She might be shown at the telephone, ringing up half the actors in London to find a Macbeth to play at six hours' notice. She might be seen in clouds of dust superintending the knocking down of a great wall, at lightning speed, to accommodate a sudden expansion of the orchestra. She might – but there is no end to the number of things she might not be doing.

The final verdict upon her must be that she has done what everybody imagined to be impossible – produced opera for the poor, supported by the pockets of the poor, and brought Shakespeare to the people, not in tabloid doses, but in all his glory; not in spasmodic intervals, but all the time. And what she has done once she can do again.

## IV

### SIR THOMAS BEECHAM

*or*

A Prophet without much Honour

THE only redeeming feature in our country's neglect of Sir Thomas Beecham is that we have not put up any statues to him. In any other nation, of course, he would now be seen gazing with leaden eyes over the parks, or holding a stony baton above the thronging steps of the National Opera House. But in England, where we owe him so much, there are no statues, and I am glad of it. I should hate to see that vigorous right arm; which has conducted me along so many enchanted ways, prematurely stilled. I like to go on thinking of him as something vigorous and electric, always fired by the ecstasy of the music he is interpreting.

And here, at the outset, I have made a bad mistake. For, according to him, there is no ecstasy about conducting. He does not feel, like Goossens, that sense of being lifted up on wings of music, of soaring in a sublime ether of intoxication. 'I hate to disillusion you,' he once said to me, 'but I never feel in the least "intoxicated" when I'm conducting. On the contrary, I feel like a slave-driver. And as such I have two tasks before me. The first is to *galvanize* the players – a matter of personal magnetism which one might call a form of hypnotism. The second is to keep my brain very cool

and very clear. Otherwise I should lose my effects. Supposing, for example, that we were playing a long crescendo. Every phase of that crescendo, if it is to be a true one, must be clearly graded in my mind. It must be delivered with a mathematical accuracy, from its start to its finish. If I allowed my emotions to dominate me, the whole outline would be blurred. One has one's vision, of course, but when one is trying to convey that vision, one's feet must be very firmly planted on the ground. The only conductor who can really allow himself to be intoxicated is the conductor of a jazz band.'

And here his eyes rolled round at me, in that surprising way they have, lit upon me like searchlights, flickered, and rolled away again. I understood, in that brief moment, how hopeless it would be for even the most obscure double-bass to avoid being 'galvanized' if Sir Thomas were out to galvanize him. He is, of all conductors, the most authoritative. He always works without a score – I don't know of any other conductor but Toscanini of whom one can say the same – and, as a result, there is never a moment's escape from the domination of those eyes. They are the eyes of a born leader.

It is one of the great tragedies of English artistic history that we have not allowed him to lead us anywhere. I suppose it is because we are so beautifully democratic that we have drifted into our present musical morass. He could have led us out of it. He has spent over half a million pounds of his own money in endeavouring to do so. But we prefer to muddle along, with occasional haphazard and expensive orgies of opera,



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

congratulating ourselves that we are not as other nations who are so unmusical, poor things, that 'they actually subsidize opera.' The argument is a little like that of the Frenchman who accused the Englishman of uncleanness because he took so many baths.

I asked him if he felt bitter about it all. 'Not for myself,' he said; 'but for the public, yes. You see, nobody is *doing* anything. And yet music is the art of the people. Isn't it? You can't go into a flat or a cottage or a tenement in this country without seeing the evidence of a desire for music, in some form or another. It may be only a cracked piano, or a gramophone, or even a concertina; but the desire is there. You couldn't say the same about literature. There are many homes in England without books. Nor could you say the same about pictorial art. The National Gallery on a Bank Holiday is sufficient evidence of that. Nobody goes there. But music — everybody wants it. And nobody is giving it to them. I tried, but . . .'

Let me explain, by a single example, what that 'but' meant. About ten years ago the corporation of a certain great city in England asked Sir Thomas to come down and weld the various orchestras in the city into a harmonious whole. After infinite difficulty, and considerable personal expenditure, he did so. He got together an orchestra which he rapidly transformed into a brilliant, enthusiastic unit. It seemed that this orchestra might well develop into a permanent institution.

Then one day, when he was in the middle of organizing the next season, he learnt (not from the corporation,

but from a casual source) that the corporation, without even considering it necessary to inform him, had calmly handed over the town hall to the local food committee. With one blow, his orchestra was destroyed. There was no other possible hall in the city. The thing had to stop. And he had already made contracts with his players involving him in a sum of rather more than £30,000.

Such is the fate of the man who tries to give music to England. We won't have it, because we won't be led. But, as Sir Thomas said, not bitterly, but very emphatically, 'In art you *must* have leaders. Art is the only human activity in which you can't "muddle through." In war, of course, it doesn't matter. You can win a war merely by doing nothing, and doing it longer than the other fellow. You can win a political campaign by the same methods. But in art everything has to be planned, organized, fought for. An opera-house doesn't suddenly come into existence by the light of nature. It isn't cast up out of the bowels of the earth, like a Member of Parliament or a Government Committee. And until we realize the fact, we shall never have an opera-house.'

I have talked too much of his theories and too little of the man. But where does one begin? At Rossall, where, needless to say, he was captain of his house? At Wadham, in the shadow of great reputations? In London, after the quarrel with his father, where for seven years he was glad to pick up a few guineas by playing accompaniments to any singer who liked to engage him? At the production of his first opera – in Clapham, of all

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

places? Or would you prefer to move again in those spacious days when, after the family trouble had been forgotten, he was giving us *Elektra*, *Salome*, *Tristan* – at Covent Garden?

Well, I have space for none of these things. I cannot even draw a picture of him reading 'Horace' before he goes to bed, or wandering through the cathedrals of Europe – of whose architecture he possesses an astounding knowledge. I can only tell you that he strikes me as one of the loneliest men in England. The popular conception of him as a gay and fêted millionaire is about as wrong as it could be. He is, indeed, almost a recluse. For the last ten years he has lived in hotels. He has no home. He hates society. Luxury bores him.

And I fear that England – or rather, the official attitude of England towards the things to which he has given his life – bores him also. I cannot say that I am surprised.

## V

HILAIRE BELLOC

*or*

Ignorance is Bliss

ME<sup>N</sup> of Faith I envy, but seldom understand. A Mr. Hilaire Belloc is pre-eminently a man of Faith. In that characteristic lies his chief importance to-day.

I do not know if he has always been a man of Faith. With my usual tactlessness I asked him that question outright, and was gently put in my place. He observed that there were some personal questions which even public men do not desire to become public. However, I think I should be right in imagining that his faith has not always dwelt with him. For one of the first things he said to me was: 'Most young men are usually agnostic.' They are.

Why, in any case, apart from our divergence of temperament, should I, of all people, understand Mr. Belloc? I hardly know him. It is true that I have often talked about him with some of his most intimate friends. Equally true that we share the same solicitude for the same typist, and the same taste in claret. Apart from that I have only had a single cursory conversation with him. It took place in the gloomiest of all surroundings – the hall of the Reform Club – a mixture between a Turkish bath and a mausoleum, made even

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

more hideous by the busts of various incompetent Liberal statesmen who apparently have been petrified by the thought of their own futility.

I should therefore have no sort of excuse for writing about him had not this single conversation been enough to convince me of something which I had previously doubted – that his Faith was something which he could not help rather than something which he had deliberately adopted for comfort, and continued to hold through force of will.

I write at a time when the Belloc-Wells controversy is still at its height. The controversy began when Belloc hoisted the flag of Orthodoxy to rally round him those whom he considered to have been misled by Wells's *Outline of History*. It is a controversy of reasoned Faith against reasoned Doubt. And Belloc gave me, in one sentence, the whole of his personal defence of Faith.

He said: 'Wells, being without Faith – or, at any rate, being a former Bible Christian who has lost his God – imagines that people who have Faith are hypnotizing themselves into having it: either out of fear or the narrowness of their traditions, or, as far as I can see, out of pure cussedness. I am not hypnotizing myself. Faith is a gift . . .'

I interrupted him: 'Is there any merit in that gift?'

My question was prompted by the memory of many infuriated moments in my life when I have been forced to listen to the sound of religious persons smacking each other on the backs because they happened to believe what I could not believe. It seems incredible

that in 1927 there should be hundreds of thousands of half-wits wandering round England and America honestly believing that they are better than their neighbours because they have faith and their neighbours have not. Faith is no more to be praised or blamed than a hare-lip. It either happens or it doesn't. It has happened to Belloc and it has not happened to me. That is all there is about it. And that is why I asked this question.

'Merit in Faith?' said Belloc. 'Not that I know of. That is a matter for theologians. But it *is* a gift; and once given it can be thrown away.'

With certain trepidation I took from my pocket a copy of *Mr. Belloc Still Objects* – a reply to Mr. Wells's *Mr. Belloc Objects*. Almost at random I opened it at the chapter where he plunges into what he describes as Mr. Wells's 'Great Rosy Dawn' – i.e., the Wellsian ideal of Utopia. He plunges, I say, into this Dawn, breathes its mist fiercely through his nostrils, and finds it no dawn at all, but a twilight preceding a universal darkness. And in the course of this discovery he throws out, into the darkness, a great many of Mr. Wells's assertions, echoing them with a contemptuous but disturbing retort of his own.

Now, I disagreed with some of those retorts, and I said so. For instance:

*'Mr. Wells says that we believe in immortality "because we should be sorry to grow old and die." I answer that he is talking nonsense on such a scale that it is difficult to deal with it.'*

It is difficult to deal with it. Not, I think, because it

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

is nonsense, but because it is, to some of us at least, depressingly true. One has only to read that little masterpiece by E. S. P. Haynes, *Belief in Personal Immortality*, or to talk to a man like Bertrand Russell or J. B. S. Haldane, to learn that this unheard-of 'nonsense' is at least rather widely spread. For myself, long before I ever heard of these men, or the dozens of other men who think like them, I had drawn the obvious deduction that since the fundamental instinct of life, in the savage as much as the civilized man, is to hold on to life, that instinct must inevitably breed a belief in the continuance of life after its obvious cessation. But Belloc thinks the doctrine is either true or false, and that if it is true our wishes have nothing to do with its being true.

So, at the outset, a yawning chasm separated us. But even across that chasm Belloc loomed as a large, if somewhat unwieldy figure. Even across that chasm he had a certain capacity to disturb. To turn to another side of the same subject, I, like the rest of us, had been brought up to regard the Darwinian system as a fundamental fact. Yet here was Belloc quoting, in the name of Common Sense as much as in the name of the Church, authority after authority to prove that it was nothing of the sort. Almost in a bombardment the names of countless European professors, with their considered verdicts against the theory of natural selection, all neatly dated and docketed, were hurled at me. The hall of the Reform Club echoed to the sound of Doctor von this and Professor von that. The result was humiliating. I seemed for a moment to be left naked in

my ignorance, though soothed by the knowledge that I was not alone in it.

Perhaps he saw what I was feeling, for he said, with one of those bull-like sighs which is so characteristic of him: 'Most young Englishmen haven't the vaguest idea that the Darwinian theory has been exploded. Outside England, especially among the younger men, the consensus of opinion is overwhelming.' He paused and looked at me suspiciously. I felt he must be thinking, 'If I can bowl you out so easily on a matter of fact, do you still feel quite sure of yourself on the matter of Faith?'

Enough of this. Should I have eschewed these vast subjects altogether, and drawn him as a John Bull with a spice of *moutarde Française*? Should I have dipped my pen in crimson and changed my Waterman for a quill in order to paint the lines of his strong, brooding face? Should I have tried to capture the sound of his smooth and very resonant voice as he begins to dictate a novel, since it is typical of him to dictate much of his work, and to begin it, incidentally, in the middle, before he attempts the end? Or should I have chosen the obvious course and brought in the conventional properties with which he is surrounded in the public eye — the red wine, the rollicking songs, the sudden silences — with a passing reference to Balliol and *The Path to Rome*?

Well, I have done none of these things. I have merely told you of a half-hour's talk in the hideous environment of the Reform Club on a wet and sullen day. But I have not told you that as I bade farewell to



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

that black-coated figure, I felt sorry for two people. I felt sorry for him because I still felt that he had nailed at least some of his colours to the wrong mast. And I felt sorry for myself because I had no colours to nail to any mast at all, and the world seemed singularly grey.

## VI

ARNOLD BENNETT

or

A Great Reporter

ONE fine day at school I picked up a book called *Literary Taste* by Mr. Arnold Bennett. The first pages informed me that, if I read the book right through, I should emerge at the end with a sound judgment of great books. This struck me as an excellent idea. I already had a stamp collection, a motor-bicycle, and a gramophone. I would now obtain a literary taste.

I read and read. Somewhere in the middle of the book I learned that I must go out and purchase a work called *Aurora Leigh*, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and read it through from beginning to end. Mr. Bennett was so emphatic about this that I went out and purchased it. But, in spite of the most valiant efforts, it proved to be unreadable. In the desolation of realizing that I had no literary taste, I cannot recall what it was about, but it struck me as nauseatingly prim, and I thoroughly agreed with Fitzgerald when I learned that he had greeted the death of Mrs. Browning with a 'Thank God we shall have no more Aurora Leighs.'

The next of his books which I read was equally unfortunate, for it told me not only how to save money, but how to make the most of every hour of the day—two destructive ambitions which, I am glad to say, are

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

nowadays likely to be achieved only by the inhabitants of his Majesty's prisons. And I began to ask myself, 'Who is Mr. Bennett that he should try to regulate one's life in this way, should stock one's library, choose one's friends, and supervise one's overdraft?'

Then I met him, and my irritation passed – turned, indeed, to guilty shame, for I did him a great injury: *I gave him a bad dinner*. Now, no ordeal throws so clear a light on a man's character as that. And since Arnold Bennett came out of it exceedingly well, he deserves to be paid tribute for it.

I remember the whole scene so vividly. There were four of us. Edward Knoblock, Melba, myself, and the subject of this essay. He sat opposite me, the tuft of his hair rather more flamboyantly aggressive than usual. The restaurant was one of those which had sprung up in a night, and was enjoying a temporary hectic popularity. Damnably enough, we were all exceedingly hungry, especially Arnold Bennett; but before we had been seated for a quarter of an hour it was obvious to the meanest intelligence that we were in for a bad time.

I watched him in agony. Would he denounce the fish? Would he curse the quail? Would he shatter the sweet? Would he? But he did none of these things. He dug his fork with a melancholy gesture into each dish, and each time that he lifted some disgusting morsel to his mouth he turned to me with a long-suffering smile which seemed to say: 'This, my lad, is not your fault. It is not even the chef's fault. It is fate. We are the Creatures of Destiny, doomed to go through life ridiculously consuming indigestible and unpalatable

substances. You, my child, are too good a host to pretend that this dinner is anything but a catastrophe. Yet, do I mind? Not at all. Life, after all, is, in one sense or another, a catastrophe, but, please notice this – it is not a bore.’

Of course, he expressed none of these thoughts aloud. But he certainly sent them into the ether. He radiated a sort of placid comfort, which, though it was not sufficient to warm a lukewarm entrée, did at least spread over it a certain glow which made it possible to pretend to eat it. It was only when we paused on the steps of his house in Cadogan Square, turning up our collars against the blustering rain, all of us looking slightly grotesque in the flickering lamplight, that he referred to the dinner at all. And then he did it in an impersonal, almost ethereal way, his high voice floating out like the cry of a wounded bird in the wind. ‘I think,’ he said, ‘that the place where we dined is just a little overrated.’

I came away from that dinner convinced that the best way of describing Arnold Bennett is to call him the World’s Greatest Reporter. Nothing escapes him. He is interested in everything. He is interested in tram-cars and bath-taps and actors and gloves and love and tea and children and modern art and Victorian dining-room furniture and jade and central heating. If he had not been born with that sense of order and decorum which makes his study one of the most precise rooms in the world, his mind would have been a mass of strange and fantastic catalogues, of the variety described by Karl Van Vechten in *Peter Whiffle*. As it is, his mind is

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

like a well-stocked wine-cellar, with an endless variety of vintages and a most capable cellar-man.

This acute interest in the normal and, to most men, unexciting routine of life is the key to his character. To him the shop-window of a woman's emporium is truly dramatic. It is a stage with a silken-stockinged back-cloth, and upon that stage inanimate objects, under the guise of commerce, perpetually play the great drama of feminine vanity. See him as he walks up the street, his head set back jauntily, a cigar held between his thumb and forefinger, his mouth slightly parted, and see him pause, rapt in ecstasy, before the window of an ordinary hosier's. He is not thinking of the purchase of a tie. (He has about forty superbly frivolous ties already packed away in a drawer of his wardrobe. He showed them to me one afternoon and I found it exceedingly difficult, as spotted poplin succeeded striped silk, and crimson crêpe vied with sober blue, to maintain an adequate crescendo of admiring adjectives.) A tie, to Bennett, is as exciting as a flag to Chesterton, for it sets his mind thinking of the neck that it will encircle, the comedies and tragedies with which it will be mutely associated.

I am not romancing. He practically admitted this himself. I forget exactly how he described the inspiration of *The Old Wives' Tale*, but in essence it came from the sight of an old woman, fussy, plain, and out of breath, walking into a restaurant with a great many parcels. The sight of her aroused in him the quite commonplace reflection that even she had once been attractive.

Now that is, as I say, a feeling that nobody could conceivably call subtle. But it led directly or indirectly to *The Old Wives' Tale*. And it is significant that the magnificent climax of that novel deals also in a starkly simple method with one of the most elemental and obvious emotions known to mankind – that experienced by a woman on seeing her husband lying dead before her. I will end with it, in order that you may not think my attitude to Mr. Arnold Bennett entirely flippant:

‘Sophia then experienced a pure and primitive emotion. She was not sorry that Gerald had wasted his life. What affected her was that he had once been young, and that he had grown old, and was now dead. That was all. Youth and vigour had come to that. Youth and vigour always came to that. Everything came to that. By the corner of her eye reflected in the mirror of a wardrobe near the bed she glimpsed a tall, forlorn woman, who had once been young and was now old. He and she had once loved and burned and quarrelled in the glittering and scornful pride of youth. But time had worn them out. “Yet a little while,” she thought, “and I shall be lying on a bed like that. And what shall I have lived for? What is the meaning of it?” The riddle of life itself was killing her, and she seemed to drown in a sea of inexpressible sorrow.’

## VII

E. F. BENSON

*or*

Very Much at Home

*Oh, how I hate the cold!  
It makes me feel so old;  
It makes me cough and wheeze;  
It makes me sniff and sneeze.*

FOR this hitherto unpublished poem of Mr. E. F. Benson, I feel faintly guilty, as though I had stolen to Hall Caine's blotting-pad and extracted from it his latest interpretations of the Deity's desires. Yet, when one has heard a poem fourteen times, recited in a cheerful falsetto by the author, the hearer of it obtains almost a proprietary right in it. Which, here and now, I assume.

It happened like this. We had been lunching in his house in Brompton Square, the one house in London that I feel should have been mine by rights. Outside, April was 'laughing her girlish laughter' in the shape of a grey fog which refused to be dispelled even by the keenest of English winds. And, to show my contempt of the weather, I had gone to the piano to play him my latest song, which, not unnaturally, appeared to bore him considerably.

He then pushed me rudely from the piano, and

played a Bach fugue to which, in the irresponsible gaiety of his spirit, he had affixed those words:

Oh, how I hate the cold!  
 It makes me feel so old;  
 It makes me cough and wheeze;  
 It makes me sniff and sneeze . . .

But why bother about the cold in such a house? Why worry about fogs when you have brown rooms filled with silence, and red rooms plastered with ridiculously attractive posters – of the Underground Railway, and a hall which you have painted a Giotto blue with your own hands? And when, outside your window every morning, the trees are sighing and the branches beckoning with a benediction? I cannot think of Benson apart from his house – perhaps because I never see him anywhere else. But he is a house-proud man, so much that I believe that is one of the most important things about him.

In spite of my enviable reputation as an impertinent young man, I often find it exceedingly difficult to ask people exactly the sort of questions one wants to ask them. I could never, for instance, ask Lady Oxford what she really thought about Lloyd George. (As a matter of fact, she told me without being asked, but that is neither here nor there.) And I could never ask Benson if Dodo really was (as everybody so constantly asserts) a mere picture of Margot herself. But a few vague hints produced something of what I wanted to know.

‘Oh, that!’ he said. ‘I was only just twenty when I



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

wrote the first half of it, and I had never seen her, as far as I know. It came out of my own inside. Then I shoved it away in a drawer and forgot about it. And then one day I remembered it, and did the rest.'

'But the talk!' I said. 'Can you really talk like Dodo?'

'Of course I can. Only it would be terribly boring in real life. It would drive you crazy, and would make you run howling down the stairs. Imagine anybody actually talking like Miss Bates in *Emma*.'

I frowned at him. 'I should have thought,' I said, 'that conversation like that was extraordinarily difficult to write. I should have thought that you kept notebooks filled with epigrams' — and here I cast a suspicious eye at his desk, which used to belong to some ancient Irish bishop — 'which you consulted from time to time, taking out six epigrams per page. It seems that I was mistaken.'

'You were.' It was his turn to frown at me. 'Anybody can write that sort of piffle straight off, if they'll only take the trouble to feel silly. Not stupid: silly. As a matter of fact, the best Dodo talk I ever wrote was Lady Charlie Beresford's in *Mother*. She didn't say any of the things I actually made her say, but she said exactly that sort of thing in exactly that sort of way.'

'Please,' I begged him, 'talk like Dodo for a moment.'

Mr. E. F. Benson declined.

It was the first time he had ever mentioned Dodo to me. And as I thought of the writing of that vivacious book at the age of twenty, the thought of all that had happened to him, and to the world, and to everybody since that happy period, set me off on a train of imagi-

nation which I could pursue almost indefinitely. I looked at the smallish, pinkish, twinkling, urbane, grey-flannel-trousered man opposite me, and I said to myself: 'Here is somebody who has lived a life extraordinarily like the life I should have liked to lead. Here is somebody who has been to the great parties of the 'nineties, who has sat round a table while Oscar Wilde crooned his crooked, polished stories; has watched in amazement the double eyebrows of Lady Charlie Beresford; has, as a young man, listened to Melba and De Reszke in a glittering Covent Garden; has plunged his body into the clear blue of Capri waters; has been acclaimed as a literary lion – nauseating phrase! – by half London before he was out of the twenties; and has finally come to rest in a quiet London square, having retained the sparkle of his eyes, his taste for Italian wine, and, above all, his love of a sheet of white paper in the stillness of the night, when the very inkpot seems a magic pool, capable of producing a million secrets.'

But always I come back to his house. The furniture in it seems to have been placed there by the gentle hands of Time. The pictures have almost grown into the walls; and surely from the floors of it the carpets have sprung naturally, like some gracious form of grass. I once asked him to lunch with me. He refused, politely but firmly. He said: 'I like my own house best.'

And I replied, 'So do I.'

I do. I wish I could capture on paper the love which its owner feels for it. In the hall he points to the chequered floor and says, 'I want to play chess on that

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

some day.' Every night I can imagine him saying that to himself, moving, in dreams, a gigantic knight to check a gigantic queen – or whatever does check queens in chess, for I do not play the game. And then he turns to a Stuart pulpit, stuck against the wall, and tells how his father, the lovable but fearsome Archbishop, was once on a tour in Devonshire and saw it being moved out of an old church, and bought it on the spot.

'And in the summer,' he said, 'the sun sets as one is dining over there – through the trees.'

He leant forward and pointed to the desolate sky that glowered at us through the old windows. I looked, too. And, by some trick of imagination, it seemed that the sky was glowing, that it was evening, and summer, in Brompton Square. I looked back at Benson. His face was glowing with reflected happiness – the happiness of anticipation. That is, I believe, his secret – the reason why he never grows old, even though Dodo to-day is a little antiquated, and many of his other novels are growing more and more dusty on the shelves of the subscription libraries. *He* doesn't care, I'm sure. Nor would you, if you had a house like his.

## VIII

### LORD BERNERS

*or*

A Rococo Byron

OF late, certain tourists on the main roads of France and Italy have returned to their native lands with startling stories of an Apparition. These stories have variations, but the main theme is always the same. It concerns a masked figure that flashes by them in a high-powered car. Sometimes the figure wears a chalk-white mask with a shock of orange hair; sometimes the mask is negroid, with staring eyes and cherry-coloured lips; sometimes it is a mask with a broad forehead and a heavy jowl, bearing a singular resemblance to Beethoven. And always it sweeps past swiftly, leaving only a cloud of very real dust to persuade the spectator that he has not seen a ghost.

You will, of course, have guessed that were the Apparition to remove its mask in passing there would be revealed the amiable features of the subject of this essay. But you may not have guessed the reason for this habit. It is, in Lord Berners's own words, because 'I get very bored with my own face. To go through the world with the same face is quite as wearisome as to go through the world with the same suit.' When you come to think of it, it is. For even Mr. Ramon Navarro, I imagine, must sometimes get tired of his own profile. I

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

know that I do. (Mine, not Mr. Ramon Navarro's.) But, not being an *original* like Lord Berners, I have never worn a mask. I think I shall try.

And yet . . . it has its disadvantage. That occasion, for instance, when the brothers Sitwell were coming to lunch with him in Rome. Did he not, to greet them, don the mask of a particularly ferocious negro, and, throwing wide the shutters of his apartment, peer out on to the sun-baked road? And did not a small boy who was passing on a bicycle utter a stifled scream, fall from his vehicle, and all but suffer a bloody death beneath the wheels of a passing Isotta-Fraschini?

Perhaps these introductory remarks may help to indicate why, on the Continent, Lord Berners is coming to be regarded as the rightful successor to Lord Byron. But no. One does not gain a Byronic reputation merely by the wearing of a mask. There are many things behind the mask. It is my sordid purpose to reveal some of them.

Perhaps I had better begin by noting how des Esseintes, the hero of one of Huysman's most fantastic romances, would have been rejoiced by his theories of the æsthetic. For, like des Esseintes, Berners finds strange analogies between the various arts. 'I know that I should be a good cook,' he said to me one day, 'for what is the difference between taste and colour? The same faculties which enable one to write an *étude* which is worth hearing or to paint a picture which is worth seeing also enables one to cook an omelette which is worth eating. Once one had mastered the elements of cooking one would be as unlikely to put too much

sugar into a *soufflé* as to put too much sentimentality into an aria. Provided one has the right ideas, what does it matter in which medium you choose to express them?’

As though to prove his point, he showed me some pictures which he had recently painted. Two years ago he had never painted anything at all. Then suddenly he said to himself, ‘I will paint.’ (Rows of mildewed tubes in my attic bear witness to a similar desire, frequently recurring, on my own part.) But with Berners the desire bore fruit. He summoned a Royal Academician. He said, ‘I must paint. What do I paint with, and what do I paint on? In fact, how do I paint?’ The Royal Academician (it might just as well have been a cook or an architect) informed him that one must first spread an even layer of colour over one’s surface, that one must then . . . but, of course, you know all that for yourself.

The fact remains that Berners’s little pictures are good pictures. The first thing he did was a copy of a Polemberg. The anatomy of the lady in the picture is almost suspiciously accurate. The whole spirit of the picture, apart from its mere mechanics, is charmingly caught. There followed copies of Durer prints, in which he ‘put in’ his own colouring, then suddenly an original interior which, to me at least, is beautiful in colour and design. Now he is painting Cezannes. Or *was* painting Cezannes. For one day Diaghileff heard of this departure from his first love, and stormed into his Lordship’s room, crying: ‘*Je vous défends de faire de la peinture! Je vous le défends!*’ And since Diaghileff can be more

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

terrifying than Satan, the paintings were put away, and our hero wandered back to the piano.

As soon as he is at the piano, the mask drops, and the revelation through music begins. It is curiously personal music, distinguished by a Rabelaisian humour. I shall never forget his playing to me a passage for horns which occurs in his ballet. There had been a theme which galloped and sparkled, up and down, in and out, like a scamper of wild horses over the plains. And then suddenly, in an unexpected key, there came a regular cackle of fifths – loud and broken, staggering and absurd. It was as good an example of a musical guffaw as I can imagine. I cannot think of any other composer who could have obtained that effect unless it might be Stravinsky, and he would probably have made it stagey and melodramatic. Nor can I think of any other composer who could have reached quite the pitch of absurdity which he reached in the little number which was recently given in a Nigel Playfair revue – ‘A Funeral Dance in Memory of a Rich Aunt.’ Some men might possibly have imagined the theme, but it is improbable that they could have developed it with so much humour.

The extraordinary thing about him is that, as a composer and orchestrator, he is practically self-taught. A few lessons from Stravinsky and Casella, and then he began to write for the orchestra himself. Anybody who has tried, unaided, to write even a string quartet must be aware of the maddening difficulties which the proceeding involves. (Memories of my own little revue, running at this moment, crowd upon me, for what I had

written as a delicate flute accompaniment proved to be so powerful that a simple patter song sounded exactly like the Mad Scene from *Lucia*.) But to write, almost untaught, scores for full orchestra – and such scores, with inextricably tangled counterpoint and fiercely battling harmonies – that seems incredible. If you have the Berners idea, it becomes less fantastic. It is all a question of colour. Just as you feel you must put a dash of pepper in an omelette which you are cooking, or a streak of green in the shadows of an interior which you are painting, so you feel called to introduce the acrid sound of a *cor anglais* into an orchestral overture. An interesting example, in fact, of the unity of æsthetics.

But he does not do it in deference to any æsthetic theory. He does it because it is such fun – fun, just as he places on his mantelpiece fresh oranges stuck with multitudes of cloves, knowing that when you give the oranges a squeeze a heavenly odour will assail your nostrils. Fun is, after all, the only valid reason for doing anything at all, and the only reason why he has written his new ballet. Indeed, I see his life itself as a sort of ballet, charming and faintly grotesque, set against brightly coloured cloths in quaint cities. And himself on tiptoe through a crowd of the gayest creatures, often with a mask to his face, and even when he drops it, keeping more secrets than he tells.



## IX

### MISS EDNA BEST

#### The Well-known Nymph

THERE is a good deal to be said for the old-fashioned form of interview. For instance, I might save a great deal of time in this article by beginning:

'Did your parents object to your choice of the stage as a profession, Miss Best?' she was asked.

'Oh, *no*,' replied the talented interpreter of Tessa. 'They all seemed very anxious that I should go on the stage.'

'Had you always had an aspiration to play in tragedy?'

'Oh, *yes*,' countered the idol of the New Theatre. 'But — shall I make you a confession?'

'That is what I am here for,' with a grim smile.

However, since I already feel faintly sick, I shall put the confession in my own way.

The scene is laid in Scotland, at Perth, of all places, one of the most depressing cities in a land of depressing cities. It is Hallowe'en. Before a dimly lit mirror sits a romantic young actress, whose name had better remain unknown. Standing by her side, a look of even more intense innocence than usual on her face, is Miss Edna Best. She is saying to the romantic one:

'Of course, I don't know if I *really* believe in these things. But the legend is that if you sit in front of your glass at Hallowe'en, and eat three green apples,

the face of your future husband will be reflected in the mirror at midnight.'

An expression of rapture spreads over the face of the other. 'Supposing there *was* something in it?'

Miss Best elaborates the legend.

'But where could I get the apples?'

Miss Best, strangely enough, possesses the apples.

The other eagerly accepts the gift. And Miss Best tiptoes out of the room shortly before midnight, leaving a figure sitting expectantly in front of the glass, munching.

Now for the motive — the hideous motive of this little drama. Miss Best was not superstitious. She had no illusions about Hallowe'en. But neither had she any illusions about the probable effect of three large green apples, consumed in an excited condition at midnight. The effect was exactly as she planned. On the next day the actress was attacked by such acute indigestion that she was unable to appear. And it was Miss Best who that night enchanted the audiences of Perth. For she was the romantic lady's understudy.

I have told this story in the hope that it may shatter some of that tiresome legend of childishness which still hangs round Miss Best, making so many of our critics regard her performance in *The Constant Nymph* as a sort of fluke, for which she must be gently patted on the head. Now that they know her to have been a Borgia, in spirit if not in fact, for some years past, they may cease to irritate her by assuming that a schoolgirl complexion is a necessary indication of a schoolgirl mind.

Still, we have some things for which to bless this

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

lingering of adolescence. Without it, we might never have had her Tessa. Tessa, played by certain other actresses I could name, might have been sentimental, or hoydenish, or incredible, or merely dull. But she has made the part a thing of April beauty, swiftly happy and swiftly sad, poisoning it, more by genius than by judgment, in that uncharted region where the land of childhood still shines clear behind her, and the other land, which she was never to explore, is swinging out of the mists ahead.

With my usual capacity for asking obvious questions, I demanded to know how she did it. 'How,' I said, 'were you able to suggest so wonderfully the transition from childishness to womanhood?' And she made rather a weird answer.

'By *thinking* it. That's the one really extraordinary thing — I almost said uncanny — that I've learnt about the stage. Apart altogether from the conventional nonsense about magnetism, and the "unseen chain," there actually is a definite form of telepathy by which you can make an audience feel acutely what is in your own mind, even though you give them no sort of clue, either by your words or your actions, to what you are thinking.

'I first found that out in comedy. After I'd been playing a flapper part for months and months, repeating the same rather inept jokes, it began to be impossible for me to persuade myself any longer that they were funny. And as soon as I didn't *think* they were funny, they ceased to *be* funny, and nobody laughed. I said my lines with exactly the same intonation. I did exactly the

same business. But something had gone, and the audience knew it. It wasn't till I cheated myself into thinking them funny once more that the laughs came back.

'Well, I did exactly the same with Tessa. In the first act I have to run about as a rather precocious child. In the last act I have to die as a young woman. I can't indicate that transition merely by making up or putting on a worried look, or lengthening my skirt, or emitting hacking coughs, at appropriate intervals. I can only do it by *thought*. And so, from the first minute that I came on to the stage, I thought terribly hard about the last scene. I don't imagine that it makes any difference to my gestures, or even to my expression. But, as far as I can gather, it affects the audience in the same way that it affects myself. At least I know that if I played that first act simply as an act in itself, without thinking of all that was coming afterwards, the result would be entirely different.'

I wish that a few other actresses would occasionally consider, in this fashion, the superiority of mind over matter. So many of them seem to imagine that they can convey infinite subtleties by a wink or a *moue*, although their minds are already grimly fastened upon the bottle which is cooling for them at the Embassy. Well, they can't. And the criticism applies not only to actresses, but to all mankind. Every man and woman I know, with the possible exception of Noel Coward, is, mercifully enough, a hypocrite. Occasionally, however, we can cheat ourselves into sincerity. And it is in these moments that we do our best work, whether it consists

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

in falling in love, building an empire, or smashing a war memorial.

Once more unto the Constant Nymph I asked just one other obvious question. Simply this: 'I, as a layman, have often wondered how you rehearse a big hysteria scene like that at the end of the second act of "The Constant Nymph." Doesn't it make you feel completely idiotic? Or do you get filled with vast passions, so that you hurtle yourself round the stage and go on having hysterics among the scene-shifters for hours afterwards?'

The reply was unromantic. 'It comes from the stomach,' said Miss Best demurely. 'Or perhaps I should say the lungs. I become absolutely breathless. My heart jumps about. And I don't feel in the least idiotic.'

'But, as far as this particular scene is concerned, I succeeded partly by a fluke. I was rehearsing two days before we opened. I was tired and nervous. In the big scene on the sofa Miss Cathleen Nesbitt suddenly shook me particularly violently, and I fell down and bumped my head hard on the floor. That finished it. I played the rest of the act in real hysterics. But all the time I remembered what I was doing. I said to myself, "This is *good*." And I have played the scene in the same way ever since.'

If Miss Nesbitt will make a tour of the homes of our leading ladies, and bump all their heads on the floor, she will be conferring an inestimable benefit upon the English stage.

## X

SIR JOHN BLAND-SUTTON, B.T.

*or*

An Artist with a Knife

‘**I**N fact,’ I said, more to myself than to the little black-coated figure who sat opposite me, ‘with one single cut you separated the surgery of the past from the surgery of the present.’

It was an academic phrase, but I think a true one. Still he made no reply. There was a yellow carnation in his hands, which he was pulling to pieces with tiny, listless fingers. Although the flower was fresh, he seemed merely to give it a stroke, and at once the petals fluttered on to the tablecloth.

‘If I had been you,’ I said, rather breathlessly, ‘it would have been the most tremendous moment in my life. I should have said to myself, “With this knife I am about to alter the face of history. Till now, surgeons have cut and cut again, bound back wounds with a dozen pairs of forceps, prolonged the agony indefinitely. But I have an instinct that I can change all that. I shall cut once, deep, and it will be finished.” And you did.’

I had been so absorbed in putting myself in his place, in that hospital forty years ago, that for a moment I felt I was indeed the President of the Royal College of Surgeons. I looked at him almost in disappointment.

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

'You must admit that you got *some* sort of thrill out of that?'

He held up a completely ravished carnation and blinked at it with eyes so deeply blue that they were almost black. The stalk fell from his fingers. The eyes switched back to me. Had I possessed yellow hair I believe he would slowly have pulled it out by the roots, like the carnation. But that is one of the few charms which have been denied me. And so he said:

'Yes. I had the thrill. The sort of thrill that the actor gets. I had an *instinct* that I could do the job in a single cut — that I could dispense with all those cumbersome stages. And my instinct was right. But that didn't make it any the less exciting, especially as there would have been plenty of people to say, "I told you so," if anything had gone wrong.

'I *knew*.' His eyes strayed somewhat wistfully in the direction of that remaining carnation, and I had a momentary tremor that he was again going to stop. But he went on. 'For five whole years I'd been practising at the "Zoo." I used to do the post-mortems there for nothing. (They pay a man £400 a year for the job now.) I was learning, learning all the time.

'Then the others began to do their operations in the same way. They said, "We'll use the Bland-Sutton method." And they gaily cut right through. But somehow it didn't quite work.' The lines at the corners of his mouth shaded downwards. 'A matron who had watched these operations said to me, "You are the most dangerous man that was ever let loose in an operating theatre. What you do looks so easy that they're all

trying to do it. And then, when they see what they *have* done, they get in a panic, and it's a poor look-out for the patient."

"But that was years ago."

His eyes sought the vase, did not find it, and fluttered back to me, a little plaintively. Quickly, lest he should seek his carnation again, I said: "I can't think how you can bear to cut people up at all. It would make me sick. Haven't there been times when you have longed to get out if it all?"

"I once asked a woman that question," he said. "The woman was Phyllis Neilson-Terry. I had seen her mauled and humiliated in a horribly realistic piece of acting with — I said to her, "How can you possibly allow yourself to be treated in that way? How can you submit yourself to such indignities?" And she said, "It isn't I who am submitting. It's the artist in me. And the play demands it." You see," he said, "one will suffer anything for one's art."

If I had been writing a novel, and had wished my surgeon-hero to make exactly the right reply, I could not have thought of a better phrase than those few words.

It is typical of him that he should have illustrated his point with a reference to the stage. For him, the operating theatre is indeed a theatre. It is a stage on which he is acting, with impassioned skill, not for applause or for criticism, but for life or death. He feels that there is something of limelight in the great arcs that glare down on to the still body, a smell as intoxicating as cosmetic in the sickly ether, a challenge in the fixed eyes of the students, the nurses, and — the critics.



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

That is why he is a great surgeon. If an operation were to him merely a matter of the severing of tissues or the extraction of a morbid growth, he would not have been the President of the Royal College. But it is much more than that. It is a battle.

Listen to the manner in which he once described to me a certain operation where all seemed lost. A sudden, appalling crisis had arisen. This is not a medical treatise, and we can leave the nature of the crisis to the imagination. But Bland-Sutton's picture of himself standing there, pausing for a moment, is too vivid to pass by.

'I put my finger on the opening,' he went on, 'and I looked round at the students and the nurses. Every face in that room was as dead-white as this tablecloth. And there was absolute silence. *They had ceased to breathe.*

'I called for a needle and thread. One of the white-faced ghosts handed it to me. As I put in the last stitch, there was a sound in the room like the wind sweeping down a corridor. *They had breathed again.*'

He leant forward. 'That was like a theatre, wasn't it? Haven't you ever noticed it, at one of your first nights? Some crisis comes — the whole of a woman's life dependent on a "yes" or a "no." Pit and gallery are frozen, incapable of breath. Then with the answer, they sigh — a sigh almost of exhaustion. I remember that happening in 1900 on the first night of *Mrs. Dane's Defence*, when Lena Ashwell made her name.' And then, abruptly: 'The patient recovered. I saw her alive and in good health three years later.'

SIR JOHN BLAND-SUTTON, B.T.

He rose to his feet, and went over to the corner. A black mass that had been lying there, stirred, rose, disclosed itself as a superb and irresistible cat. For a moment I remained seated. But one cannot watch anybody playing with cats. One must join in. I joined in.

That, if you understand cats, was not bathos, but an ascent to a higher plane of thought.

Thus, when we played with the cat, we both realized that there were certain essential rites to be observed. We both, I believe, assumed a faint tinge of felinity. There were moments when one could stroke, moments when one could pat and dab, moments when it was essential to remain poised, tense and watching.

We were completely absorbed. Our cigarettes smouldered and died, our coffee was chilled, the fiery liqueur sulked, untouched, in its glass. The cat was drawing us with its subtle power. And as we moved, three black figures against the background of Persians standing so stiff and strange in their mist of blue and gold, it seemed to me that I was not chasing one cat, but two. The second cat had white linen cuffs and beady eyes.

## XI

ANDRÉ CHARLOT

*or*

London, Paris, and New York

I SHALL always associate André Charlot with rust-coloured curtains. I can see him now, lying back in his office chair, for all the world like a prosperous business man – except for one thing. His eyes were agonized. They constantly roved towards those curtains, flickered, flinched, and finally shut. Then the head would be turned round again, and for a time he would forget.

Inevitably one recalled those terrible lines (which once made Shelley fall fainting to the floor):

Like one that on a lonesome road  
Doth walk in fear and dread,  
And having once turned round, walks on,  
And turns no more his head,  
Because he knows a frightful fiend  
Doth close behind him tread.

The 'frightful fiend' in this case was that pair of curtains. They were exactly the wrong shade for the colour of the walls, and by some lamentable error they had been hung in Charlot's office. I have often seen people who pretend to be very upset by ugly things, but I notice that their pain is usually greater in public

than in private. There was no mistaking Charlot's emotions. Although he hardly mentioned the curtains, except in a horrified aside, he was as uneasy as a man with a spider walking over his neck.

This acute sensitiveness was, I admit, a revelation. The first time I had ever met him was when I played him a song for a revue, which, in a fit of temporary insanity, he accepted. He listened to it with the most wooden of faces. He wrote out a cheque with apparently no emotion at all – a very difficult thing to do. And he produced that song quite exquisitely. I thought 'He is only a stolid business man with an odd streak of genius (seeing that he had accepted my song) which is something *outside* the man himself.'

Well, a little knowledge of Charlot gives one a very different impression. The urbane stolid figure whom one sees sitting like a Parisian Sphinx in his box, or smoking a pipe with as much apparent calm as a country parson, is, if one only knew it, a mass of nerves. But his nerves, instead of driving him to aspirin, have found an outlet in that delicately intimate type of revue which is, after all, a form of art in which only a highly nervous man could have succeeded as he has done. He is so sensitive that he knows by instinct what most producers can only learn by reasoning.

He told me a story the other day which illustrates this point. It concerns a 'time-sheet.' For those few who may not know what this means, it may be stated that a 'time-sheet' is the list of 'numbers' kept by a revue producer in order to inform him exactly how long his show will last. Opposite each number is the time at

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

which it begins and the time at which it ends – measured sometimes to seconds. Without a time-sheet, most men would be utterly lost. Yet Charlot has actually created an entire revue, from its first inception to its final dress rehearsal, without even looking at his watch.

He said to me: ‘I wanted my last show to last three hours. I knew exactly the sort of sketches, production numbers, songs, etc., which I needed, and I got them. They were rehearsed separately, without being timed. They were rehearsed together, still without being timed. On the final dress rehearsal I timed the whole production. It lasted for two hours and forty-two minutes, which, with an allowance for applause and for laughs, worked out at exactly three hours.’

Not until you have attended a final dress rehearsal of a revue which was intended to run for two hours and three-quarters and took nine hours to race through, in hellish confusion, will you quite realize how remarkable a feat Charlot accomplished.

In the same way that he knows instinctively how long a ‘number’ can last without boring an audience, so he knows exactly how much you can say to an artist without inducing hysteria, panic, or a permanent inferiority complex. ‘I suffer such agonies myself,’ he confessed, ‘that I could not possibly bear to rave about the stage telling people that they were acting like idiots or singing like crows. I realize that actors are human beings, and that the slightest touch in the wrong direction may ruin their whole career. Besides, I am usually trying to develop some part of their personality which even they

themselves do not fully realize. And so, my real rehearsals usually begin after the apparent rehearsal is over. I go to So-and-so's dressing-room, and I say: "Don't you think you might have sung that song in rather a different way, or given a rather different interpretation to those lines?" And in ten minutes the mistake, which might never have been made right if I had cursed him in front of the whole company, has become a thing of the past.'

Making a revue, according to Charlot, is rather like making a Christmas pudding. You have to know exactly the right ingredients and right proportions. But whereas the average cook measures her ingredients by machinery, Charlot measures them by instinct, throwing in plum after plum with a splendid carelessness which seems to give an added flavour to the whole confection.

I once said to him: 'Supposing somebody came into this room at this very moment and gave you a cheque for £5,000 to produce a revue?'

'There is no immediate danger of that.'

'No. But supposing. What would you do?'

To this rather leading question he replied: 'I should sit down and shut my eyes.' He added: 'You see, although you may think it absurd to talk about inspiration with regard to a revue, one must have inspiration. I mean that one must really *suffer* to produce beautiful things, and suffer, perhaps, even more to produce amusing things. You may think that it is quite easy, when one has a great number of sketches and songs, and several brilliant artists, and a lot of money, to produce a

• ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

good revue. It isn't. Take the case of the artists. I may have a woman with a marvellous personality, and nothing but a personality. She is not pretty. She can't sing. She can't dance. She does everything wrong. But through her personality she is a great artist, always provided that I can find her the right material. (I could not help thinking, in this connection, of Beatrice Lillie. Her features are not classical. Her voice is not obviously melodious. I have seen more graceful women. But, as Charlot said, through her personality she is a great artist, and we owe Charlot a debt for discovering the fact.) 'Don't think it is easy,' he added. 'It is the most exhausting thing in life. It means studying not only that woman, but every aspect of life which she might interpret. It takes me on strange journeys, to stranger places.'

He paused abruptly. Those curtains had again caught his eye.

It is not therefore surprising that Charlot maintains that the creation of a revue demands a very high level of intelligence. Well, he has it. On the musical side he can point to a study of two years at the Paris Conservatoire. He can boast that Debussy himself, at the time of his death, was writing a ballet for him. On the artistic side he can recall that he was the first man who introduced Poiret to London — Poiret, who in those days was as great a designer as Bakst, and has certainly influenced contemporary costume more than any other man of this century. On the literary side he can claim, without exaggeration, that he raised the 'book' of revue from the position of a despised poor relation to the

chorus and the coiffeur to a place of primary importance.

There are, indeed, a dozen positions in which one might paint him. But the portrait I like best is that which shows him sitting in the dressing-room, diffidently suggesting that 'perhaps you might have put just a little more into that second verse.'



## XII

SIR ALAN COBHAM

*or*

Such a Little Bird

THE first thing that struck me about him was his singular solidity. I don't mean that I had expected to find him intangible – a wraith-like creature hovering between the land and sky. But I *had* expected something a little fluttering – slightly bird-like. You know the sort of thing – a beaky nose, thin, nervous hands, and, most of all, eyes which darted hither and thither, as a bird's eyes presumably dart in flight. There is nothing of that about Sir Alan Cobham. One would say, from a first impression, that he was from the provinces, a capable bank-manager, a quite earthly mortal, who not only had never soared out into the Great Loneliness, but had never experienced the faintest desire to do so. His nose is not beaky, nor are his hands nervous; and his eyes – strangest of all – are mild and, so it seemed to me (at first), filled with sleep.

I was not therefore very surprised when one of the first things he said to me was: 'I'm a business man. I have to be. I want to get things done. I want to say to myself: "I'm going somewhere where nobody's ever been before, and somebody's going to be the better for my going!"'

'Then, has it all become merely mechanical to you

now?' I asked him. 'I mean, when you set out for China or Peru, or wherever you may be going, is it just the same as climbing on to the top of a bus at the Marble Arch and getting off at the City? Or do you still get a kick out of it all? Do you still feel you're a sort of romantic pioneer, a sort of crusader?'

'Well,' he said, 'I can't romance about it, because, if I did, I shouldn't get very far. But I can never imagine tiring of watching the things that go on below. Some people seem to think that nobody who flies can ever see anything of the country they pass over. That's all wrong. One sees everything, if one's got the eyes, and it's all amazingly varied, amazingly beautiful. Seeing things constantly from the air spoils you for seeing them from any other view-point. It's like being taken up on to the top of a high mountain. One has the same sense of exhilaration, the same feeling of power . . .'

As he spoke, his eyes lit up, as though they had caught the glint of the sun. The provincial bank-manager retreated into the background. One realized that the 'business man' exterior was only a cloak for a romantic spirit. And, indeed, has he not shown, in his own dispatches, a lyrical quality of enthusiasm that is difficult to associate with his mechanical genius. Never shall I forget the little touches with which he described a flight from Saragossa to Barcelona, 'over a vast, rocky desert that looked hard and cruel.' Do you remember it? 'As I was looking well ahead,' he wrote, 'suddenly the air became scented with the perfume of flowers, and on looking over the side of the machine, we discovered that we were flying over a river valley, whose waters

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

irrigated the land, making one broad band of deep green across the desert waste.' He smells flowers, you see, as well as petrol.

And I remember, too, how richly he could steep himself in colour. Once he was flying across Europe, and drenching rains and low clouds made the journey a misery. Suddenly, within fifty miles of Constantinople, the air cleared, and there was brilliant sunshine. What did he see? In his own words, he saw 'a violet sea, a red landscape, and a blue sky.'

Now, that description seems to me exactly right. It is almost Greek in its simplicity. I do not know where he developed his prose style, probably in the best of schools, the open air.

When you listen to him talking, you would imagine that flying is really so ridiculously simple that it is quite foolish to make a fuss about it. You would think it far easier, say, than driving a two-seater down the Great West Road. In fact, I honestly believe that Cobham has now come to the conclusion that it *is* easier. 'You see,' he said to me, quite simply, 'once you're in the air there's no difficulty at all — bar finding your way. You see, up there,' and he swept his hand towards the ceiling (the first bird-like gesture I had seen him make), 'there's such a lot of room. *Bags* of room. You've got your whole country laid out for you like a map. You've merely to sit back and steer. And,' he added, casually, 'to land.'

Anybody who knows Cobham's methods well would see, studying those remarks, at least three examples of an almost depressing modesty. Modesty? Perhaps

that is the wrong word, for he struck me as being quite satisfied with his achievements. Still, let it stand. 'Once you're in the air,' for instance. Quite. 'Once you're in the air.' I haven't the vaguest idea how you get there, but I am quite certain it isn't as simple as all that. And 'you've merely got to land.' Exactly. It hardly brings before one the picture of some of his forced landings, in fogs and storms, over uncharted valleys and distant seas.

But the most complete under-statement of all was the remark: 'There's no difficulty — bar finding your way.' Talk to some of Cobham's friends about him, and you will realize that his capacity for 'finding his way' is uncanny. Before any long voyage, of course, he makes the most meticulous study of the course (the 'business man' again). He pores over maps for days, he makes exhaustive examinations of weather charts, wind charts, every sort of chart. But a time comes, and it comes often, when a chart can tell you nothing, when, like a bird blown out to sea, you have to trust to instinct, battling with all your intelligence and all your *senses* to 'find the way.'

That is where Cobham comes out on top. 'It is much more extraordinary than a cat's power of seeing in the dark,' one of his associates told me. 'It is really a sixth sense, and whether, in time to come, other people will be able to develop it remains to be seen.'

I asked Cobham about this sixth sense, but he didn't seem to understand what I was talking about. He appeared to imagine that it was something that anybody might possess. He is so entirely convinced that

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

very soon we shall all be flying. And when he explains it, you realize why.

'You see,' he said, 'the people who could afford to buy aeroplanes nowadays – I mean, the same people who have expensive cars – nearly all possess old-fashioned mentalities. They've been brought up to say "I'd as soon fly," as though flying were an impossibility. But when the new generation comes, it will be different. They'll be like boys learning to ride bicycles. In other words, they won't learn at all. They'll take it for granted.'

That is the significant thing about Cobham: this 'taking it for granted' – soaring out into Nothing with a confidence that knows no defeat. If I continue in this strain I shall lapse into heroics. And so, that will be all about this particular bird.

## XIII

MR. C. B. COCHRAN

*or*

A Big Noise

I WISH that the greatest of caricaturists – Sem, to whom it was reserved to inform the world that the Agar Khan was a fish and Lady Idina Gordon a heron – would draw Mr. C. B. Cochran. I feel certain that he would see him as a cat.

Mr. Cochran has a way of crossing his hands – when he is talking to you – which is entirely cat-like (although only the best cats do this). His eyes wander from the ceiling to the carpet as though in search of flies or mice. He can purr – and does – after a good dinner; and I have heard of him at times, when the Censor was being tiresome, emit sounds that were very like a miaou.

His most cat-like quality, however, is his mind. *One has never any idea of what he is thinking.* I have watched him listening to ‘numbers’ for a new revue, taking apparently very little interest in them, and accepting them the next day. I have also seen him waxing highly enthusiastic (as far as one could judge) over other ‘numbers,’ only to reject them when the time came.

In fact, one might almost say that he did not know what he was thinking himself. He has a general idea of what he wishes – an effect to be created, a note of colour to be introduced, a certain atmosphere to be sug-

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

gested – and that is all. It is true of the cat which sets out at twilight into the wilds of the garden to catch a mouse. It has only a dim idea of the place where the mouse may be lurking, and only a vague plan of the campaign to be adopted. But it catches its mouse. And so does Mr. Cochran.

If you can substitute for the garden Olympia, and for the mouse *The Miracle*, you may gain some idea of his mode of work. I believe he has said something about it in his book, but our respective literary styles are happily so different that I make no apology for telling the story twice.

‘When I had an option on Olympia,’ he said, ‘I went round the place alone one morning to try to gain some impression of the sort of production that could be given there. I had no ideas at all, except that the spoken word would be useless, and that one must have some immense form of spectacle.’

‘As I was standing there I suddenly thought what an amazing Gothic cathedral the place would make. I realized, too, that with a certain method of production the effect of a cathedral could be quite adequately presented.’

‘That, then, was the beginning of the theme. It grew on my mind during my journey to Germany, where I took the plans of Olympia to Reinhardt, whose work in *Ædipus* had greatly impressed me. I showed him the plans, and, without mentioning the scheme of the cathedral, asked if he had any ideas. He told me, in his squeaky voice, that it would be an ideal place in which to give a representation of the Delhi Durbar.

"Grosses elephanten! Grosses elephanten!" he kept on saying. Well, however *grosses* were the *elephanten*, I felt that the British public, even before the war, would not relish the idea of a production of the Delhi Durbar supervised by a German. And so I suggested my own plan. Vollmoller took it up; we talked it over; it evolved itself, and he went away and produced the scenario. Then I suggested the composer, and – well, that is how it happened.'

It is in this way that all his work is done – that all work of a spectacular nature probably *must* be done. You begin with a single theory, and you roll it round in your mind until it gradually gathers substance.

One of the most fascinating works in the English language which very few people seem to bother to read is Edgar Allan Poe's essay on the *Rationale of Verse*. (I am not wandering off at a tangent.) It is as gripping as any of his detective stories. It tells you, in cold-blooded language, exactly how he wrote *The Raven*. As autobiography it is probably entirely untrue, but as a mathematical study it is absorbing. Firstly, he asked himself which was the most poetical subject in the world. The answer was, 'A beautiful woman.' Then, his morbid theory of æsthetics prompted him to insist that the woman must be dead. He arrived, by equally abstract deductions, at the idea of a lover lamenting his dead mistress. Similar theories dictated the rhythm, the form, and the length of the poem, and even the Raven itself – that sinister fowl which shivered the comfortable flesh of Mrs. Browning – was the product of a purely mathematical system of verse.



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

I asked 'C. B. C.' if he produced a revue in that manner, and the answer, with certain qualifications, was in the affirmative. He said, for instance, that he could imagine going to an empty Albert Hall, and standing some wonderful creature upon a bare platform, and building a revue entirely round her, or his, personality. One could never really do it, of course, because nobody but a half-wit would imagine that theatrical affairs can be conducted on so purely æsthetic a basis. But it is the *idea* which appeals to him, and to me, and I hope to you – the idea of a figure standing there, talking, with a few gestures; the idea of hanging various coloured cloths behind that figure, of improvising melodies around her, of tinting her with lights of green and gold and silver, until eventually one had produced, perhaps, one perfect 'number' which might serve as the basis of a revue.

Am I irritating you? Would you rather learn that he has some excellent pre-war whisky, that he is a bad judge of claret (as I learnt, to my delight, on seeing his appreciation of an inferior brand which I once was forced to give him), that he is incredibly well-read, that he has a rose-coloured bath-room? Perhaps you would. But I shan't tell you.

Yet I should mention one thing – his amazing *flair* for publicity. More easily than Ajax invoked the lightning can he command the limelight. Inevitably he suggests the circus proprietor, his name sparkling, big-lettered, in the centre of the world, his whip cracking loudly, even when he is riding a storm, convincing us that he has something new, something great, something

stupendous. He realizes that as long as one is in business it does not much matter what they say about one, provided that they go on saying it. The only thing that kills is silence, and silence has never been fond of Cochran.

Yet, there was one occasion when he felt that publicity had been carried a little too far. Dare I tell the story? I think so. It occurred when he was lying very seriously ill, about two years ago, in a London nursing home. He himself did not fully realize the danger of his position. But Mrs. Cochran realized it. And it was to her that a certain young journalist with a pale face and avaricious eyes arrived one critical afternoon to inquire after the health of 'C. B. C.' On being informed that things were pretty bad, he cleared his throat, and proceeded to ask, in tones which varied between those of an undertaker and a cheap-jack, if, in the unhappy event of his decease, he might be the first to have the news. 'After all,' he said, 'I've always been very kind to Mr. Cochran, and it would do me a lot of good on my paper.'

Charming people, aren't we, we journalists?

## XIV

DUFF COOPER, M.P.

*or*

A Relic of Disraeli

LIKE Max Beerbohm, I make a hobby of imagining meetings between famous contemporaries and famous historical figures. I would give the price of ten thousand words of my work – a staggering sum – to hear Lord Oxford and Asquith explaining to Mr. Milton, over a glass of ale, the various political paradises which he has lost. I would give even more to be able to see Mussolini and Napoleon stalking haughtily towards each other, their right hands carefully tucked into their upper waistcoats, each wondering which was imitating which. And I would go miles in any weather to see the member for Oldham reclining languidly on a plush sofa, the other end of which was occupied by the young Benjamin Disraeli.

For Duff Cooper is the only young Tory I have ever met who might, without incongruity, have mingled with that little band of stalwarts – Lord John Manners, George Smyth, Henry Hope, and Baillie Cochrane – who raised the flag of young England, under Disraeli's leadership, in the far and faded 'forties. His very face is in the period. It looks as if it had been taken straight from those faintly poignant groups of former generations of cricketers which one encounters, covered with

dust, in Oxford common-rooms. His speeches, too, and his conversation have something of the Disraeli touch – something a little fatigued, yet quite sufficiently alert. But these things, after all, are superficial – the mere elegances of politics and of conduct. The thing which matters is that he, like Disraeli, is a Tory by temperament. Without violence to his soul, he could not possibly be anything else. That rhyme, which one's father still sings in his bath –

For every boy and every girl  
That's born into this world alive  
Is either a little Liberal  
Or else a little Conservative –

that rhyme, I am sure, was made especially for him.

To me, convinced of the futility of any sort of political system whatever, the argument of temperament as a basis of political thought makes an instant appeal. I do not wish to suggest that Duff Cooper, in a moment of emotion, said to himself: 'I love blue and I hate yellow, and therefore I am a Tory.' Not at all. He can defend his faith with all the statistics you may require. He can dilate upon hours, wages, and world markets, upon any human or economic problem you may foolishly desire to discuss. But his Toryism is not a product of figures, not even a product of reason – though reason may bear it out. It is an instinct – a part of himself – so much so that it colours everything he touches and everything he sees.

I have before me a letter from him which illustrates, very vividly, the idea I am trying to present. It is the

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

outcome of a conversation we once had, when I rather perversely pushed his theory to its extreme limit.

'I have been thinking over your remark about Toryism in painting,' he writes. 'Botticelli was not a Tory, Lippo Lippi was. So was Raphael. But I'm afraid we can't claim Michael Angelo nor Leonardo. Rubens was a Die-hard. Nearly all the Dutch painters were Tories except Ruysdael, and perhaps Rembrandt in his latter period, though I'm not really sure about him. Vermeer was the most perfect Tory of the lot.'

'Reynolds,' the letter goes on, 'of course was Tory, but I'm not sure that Gainsborough wasn't a Whig. (This, of course, has nothing to do with their political opinions.) Raeburn was a good Tory. Sargent wasn't. I can't think of any other painters for the moment, but I think I've given the other side a fair show. Of course, Watts wasn't a Tory – no allegorical painter could be. *Tories hate allegories.*'

You see the idea? If you have the soul of a Tory, you can see Toryism – or its opposite – in the entire and diverse spirit of mankind. I remember a conversation which I had with him one day after lunch, in a club, surrounded by many sleeping figures reclining in attitudes of abandonment behind our more opaque newspapers. We were discussing Toryism and literature. 'Dickens was really a Tory,' he said, 'in spite of the fact that outwardly he posed as a Radical. He was a Tory because – oh, well, he *was*. And Thackeray, in spite of his environment and his upbringing, was really a Whig.'

The idea rather fascinated me. 'Tennyson,' I said, 'on that principle becomes a particularly loathsome sort of Die-hard.'

'I should put him down as a Wee Free.'

'Thank you. And what about Browning?'

'Obviously a Tory.'

'Coming nearer to to-day,' I said, 'there are masses of people who obviously *aren't* Tories. Galsworthy is the most complete. Then Shaw. The Sitwells are a sort of Whig-Bolshevik. Am I going mad, by the way? It's rather difficult to know what one really means.'

'Terribly difficult.' He paused for a moment.

'I think Bagehot summed it up best when he said, "Toryism means enjoyment."'

The member for Oldham glanced at me suspiciously, as though I were about to make the obvious heckling retort that enjoyment was all very well for the 'haves,' but not quite so simple for the 'have-nots.' However, I was surrounded by the sleeping figures who appeared to have (and to have had) a great deal, and yet, by the sound of their breathing, to be far from enjoyment. So I refrained from comment.

'If you agree that Toryism means enjoyment,' he went on, 'the great political parties of England fall back, quite naturally, into two main divisions. You get the spirit of the Ironsides – a very valuable spirit in some ways, but one which was never gay, even in the height of triumph. On the other side you get the spirit of the Cavaliers, gay even in defeat. I think, of all the silly *clichés* which have ever been coined for a political

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

party, that of the "stern, unbending Tories" is the silliest. The Tory is not stern. Nor is he "unbending," which sounds as if he were too old to bend. He's absurdly young, simply because he can't help himself. He's got it in his blood. That's why the Tory party goes on. It doesn't owe its success to any particular measure. It doesn't even make any pretence to be logical — thank God. It's simply a spirit. And if I talk any more I shall wake up the gentleman on my left, which would be rather cruel . . . for me.'

I fear that this is but a sketchy impression of one of the few interesting political figures of our time; but I have been trying to define something which, as Duff Cooper himself admits, defies definition.

But because you cannot define a thing, it does not follow either that it is not there, or that it is no good. I myself, under present conditions, can enthuse greatly over no political party, simply because the whole system of government by popular representation seems to me too fantastic even to merit consideration. The idea of ruling a far-flung Empire according to the whim of an amiable charwoman (multiplied by a few million) strikes me as far more astonishing than the most curious features of the Tibetan constitution. The only possible form of Government that I can conceive is that of a benevolent despotism. And if there were no benevolent despots on the horizon, I should choose a malevolent one.

However, things being as they are, the Duff Cooper spirit is as good as anything else. To be ruled by men who, while their eyes are open to the depressing facts

D U F F      C O O P E R ,      M . P .

of to-day, are at least capable of appreciating the possibility of 'enjoyment' – in Bagehot's sense of the word – is an excellent idea. So in the next election I shall probably vote Tory. Not that it will make the faintest difference to anybody – least of all, myself.



## XV

NOEL COWARD

or

A Slave to Virtue

I HAVE written about Noel Coward before, and I shall not have the smallest hesitation in writing about him again. So that will be something to look forward to, will it not?

One could, indeed, write a monthly article about Noel Coward. About nobody else. The Ritz bar in Paris would have to give up its dead before I could revise my opinion of Mr. Michael Arlen. I could write the same article about Clemence Dane (but won't) until the sands of the desert ran cold. But Noel is different. By the time that snowdrops are threepence a bunch, he may himself be a snowdrop – writing a sort of Coward *frappé*, cold, and a little wan. Flaming June may find him afire, a romantic with a pen dipped in radiant inks, playing with dangerous words to express dangerous desires. And by the time the leaves are falling, he may have produced a religious pantomime. I hope that he will try.

It is therefore all the more astounding that the popular conception of him in this country should remain so rigidly fixed. He appears to be regarded, by the majority of his countrymen, as a Satanic young man, always surrounded by a troupe of fallen angels, always talking

to the accompaniment of a fierce rattle of hypodermic syringes. In the remoter parts of Esher it is confidently believed that he has a forked tongue. The cloven hoof, of course, is taken for granted as far west as Hammer-smith.

Why? Is there anything in his own conduct of life which can account for this legend? If so, it has escaped my notice. I have found him an almost alarmingly healthy companion. I have been dragged out to incredibly strenuous tennis with him on hot afternoons which were designed solely for the leisured and serious consumption of lime-juice. I have been forced to content myself with miniature Bronxes – only just large enough to conceal the cherry – because he has an almost puritanical attitude towards cocktails.

Why, then, the legend? Simply because the fairies at his christening, having provided him with the aforementioned forked tongue and cloven hoof, omitted also to provide him with the hypocrite's smile. He cannot cheat himself or others. He must go through the agony and sweat of all those who are slaves to Truth. You may say that *The Vortex* was not the truth. If so, you are not only mistaken, but beside the point. The point is that it was the truth for Noel Coward. He was brought into contact with a life that was jagged and strident, in which the men and women moved mechanically, like marionettes jerked on wires, a life in which all decent values had been fuddled and obscured, and he recorded it, swiftly and relentlessly. He said the other day that he was out to 'expose' that life. That, surely, was a mistaken word. An artist never desires to

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

expose anything except his own artistry. Noel did not wish to expose the people in *The Vortex*, simply because he had so profound a pity for them.

As usual, I am beginning to write too fast. Let me clear aside all the tiresome, gossipy details. I do not know what size he takes in boots, nor if he has a favourite flower, nor what he would have been if he had not been an actor. I cannot even tell you his favourite Christian name, although I will hazard a shrewd guess that it is Wilhelmina. But I can tell you that he is the only true interpreter of this age which this age has yet produced.

Somebody said to me the other day: '*The Vortex* is so utterly 1926 that it will be dated in five years.' He might as well have said that Juvenal was so utterly – whatever date he was – that he would be dated before the fall of the Roman Empire. The truth, of course, is that any artist who catches the exact echo of any period will hear his work echoed and echoed down the centuries. Noel Coward, in this play (which I still regard as by far his finest work, and the type of work upon which he should concentrate), caught such an echo. A harsh, broken echo it was, but it was true. As true as a sob in the throat of one who has known unspeakable pain. And whether it is dated or not, it is also immortal.

And now I have to contradict myself. Nobody could have written *The Vortex* who was not a sentimentalist. I am entirely convinced that Noel is a sentimentalist who is terrified of being found out – by himself. Reading his plays (a very different thing from hearing them), one has the impression that he has gone through

his work with a fine comb to eliminate from it any lurking grains of 'softness.' Examine his dialogue — smooth, hard, swift pebbles of thought, thrown disdainfully against the glass windows of the houses in which we have ensconced ourselves. Now and then, among those pebbles, is a diamond, flashing a little wickedly. But also, if you read carefully enough, you will notice a sudden pause in the bombardment, as though the author were weary of his sport, as though he longed for a moment's respite — a moment's divine folly, in which he could forget that there are few things in this world which do not add to the sum of one's bitterness.

But the pause is only momentary. He will not allow it to be otherwise. He will not permit more than an instant's 'softness.' Of all the things he ever said to me, that which impressed me most was: 'You're far too nice to people. I am not sure that you aren't a hypocrite.' I don't think I need defend myself against that accusation. There are several subjects of these articles who would, I am convinced, be delighted to defend me against it themselves. Naming no names, of course. But the remark, from Noel Coward, had a certain significance. To me it indicated an almost tragically sensitive spirit arming itself against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Not that his fortune has been in any way outrageous. It has been remarkable, and, I trust, well invested. But that is not the sort of fortune which I mean. His fortune is our fortune — the mortgaged fortune of a crazy age.

Well, if you are any wiser on the subject of Noel Coward, I am happy. I fear that you are not, because I

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

admit frankly that I have a bee in my bonnet about him, and regard him as the most important young man of our age. Consider his achievements. *I'll Leave It to You*; *The Young Idea*; *The Rat Trap*; *The Vortex*; *Fallen Angels*; *Hay Fever*; *This Was a Man*; and *Easy Virtue* – yes, and probably several more. That makes eight plays, some of them brilliantly successful, none of them negligible, from a man of twenty-seven. Added to that you have many charming tunes, some delicately indelicate sketches, a few delicious lyrics. Added, once more, to that, you have an extraordinarily interesting actor. He does everything wrong on the stage which it is possible to do. He stands in the wrong place, opens a door with the wrong hand, puts the wrong emphasis on his lines, makes, often enough, the wrong faces. And he gets away with it, simply through the immense nervous force which is surging through him. I shall never forget Seymour Hicks, the greatest technician we possess in the English theatre, standing in his stall cheering the young actor whose manifold faults he had been mercilessly condemning. Noel had done everything wrong with almost tiresome consistency. And the result had been more moving than the most polished performance even of Hicks himself.

And here I stop abruptly. Re-reading this article, I am convinced that I should have done better to talk about his size in boots. And to tell you that his favourite flower is the daisy – an important discovery which I now make public for the first time, cost me what it may.

## XVI

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

*or*

An Ungrateful Father

WE were sitting in front of a blazing fire, talking about Sherlock Holmes. It was just the sort of day on which one should talk about Holmes, for there was a thick mist in the streets outside, and it was Sunday – the day on which, one imagines, all the best criminals feel most creative.

Now, when Conan Doyle talks about Sherlock Holmes, he is obviously talking about a real person. So obviously, in fact, that I had an almost uncomfortable feeling, as though at any moment a voice would be heard in the corridors outside, shouting 'Watson!' or a thin hand be laid on my shoulder, and the rustle of a familiar dressing-gown echo behind my chair. Even now, I am convinced that Sherlock Holmes *was* somewhere near, and I was a little anxious lest he should overhear some of the not entirely laudatory things which Sir Arthur had to say about him.

'Of course, I'm grateful to Holmes,' said Sir Arthur, much as he would say that he was grateful to a bright stockbroker or a competent physician – but certainly not as though he were speaking of a son of his own. 'I'm grateful to him,' he repeated. 'He's been a very good friend to me, in a pecuniary way. But, quite

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

frankly, I get very tired of him.' (I wished he would speak more softly, because the door was open, and I could have sworn that I heard the rattling of a hypodermic syringe.)

'I fancy it may be that I know him too well,' he went on. 'I know exactly how he would behave in any circumstance, in any emergency, and that's always a bad thing to know about any of one's friends, isn't it?' (You notice the word 'friends.')

'I've always felt,' he said, 'that he's hardly human. He's got so few angles from which one can approach him. At first, he used to interest me much more. But I soon realized that he was really nothing more than a calculating machine. I feel he, and all his doings, probably appeal to a lower level of intelligence than the things which absorb me now.' (Meaning, of course, the study of spiritualism.)

Now, I thought, if Holmes *is* outside the door, the fat is in the fire. To be told that one is nothing more nor less than a calculating machine, and that one is really apt to be a little tiresome, and that one's activities appeal to a comparatively low level of intelligence — to be told all this in the face of the fact that one has brought fame and glory to one's accuser, and has invariably provided him with an ~~ex~~clusive account of one's most sensational activities — surely that is a little hard? If I were Holmes, I should treat Sir Arthur very coldly the next time I met him.

'Don't you think,' I said, by way of apologizing for this maligned creature, 'that you might try to find out a little more about his human side? His — er' — I

wanted to say 'love affairs,' but it was a little difficult with that ghostly presence so near — 'his affections?'

But Sir Arthur was relentless. 'You can't bring love affairs into detective stories,' he said. 'As soon as you begin to make your detective too human, the story flops. It falls to the ground. You have to be ruthlessly analytical about the whole thing. If I had made Holmes human . . .'

I could not bear it any longer. I therefore decided to draw a red herring across the trail. I had seen in an American newspaper an extraordinary theory that Conan Doyle composed his detective stories simply 'by imagining any sort of muddle and then clearing it up.' For instance, he would describe a room in appalling confusion, with a dead man on the carpet. He would fill the room with baffling clues, and then sit down to work the whole thing out, inventing the story to fit the clues, which, when he first laid them, were as meaningless to him as anybody else. I asked him if there was any truth in this theory, and, not greatly to my surprise, he answered, 'None.'

'This is how I write a detective story,' he said. 'First of all, I get my central idea. When I say I "get" it, I mean that it comes of its own accord. I can no more sit down and command ideas than I can sit down and command rain. Take *The Speckled Band* as an example. The first stage of that story was when suddenly, and for no particular reason, the idea came to me of a man killing somebody with a snake. I thought the idea a good one, and thinking of it made it gradually grow. The man, I decided, should be an Anglo-



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

Indian, and the person he should kill would be, naturally, somebody whose death would be to his advantage – preferably a woman. To heighten the gruesome effect of the story, I decided that it should be laid in remote surroundings, which would make the pathos of the victim the more acute.

‘Already, therefore, we had arrived, after a very little thought, at the conception of an unscrupulous man who has lived in India planning to murder his step-daughter by means of a snake in order that he may reap the benefits of a will which should rightly be hers. Well – there’s the basis of your story. The rest consists in two tasks – the concoction of false scents to put the reader off the track and to keep him guessing until the last minute, and the provision of clues, as ingenious as one can make them, for the detective to follow up. Obviously, in the basis of *The Speckled Band*, there are dozens of clues which one can lay in front of the detective. The Anglo-Indian might have books on snakes in his library, he might – oh, really, there are so many ways in which he might give himself away that the difficulty is not in imagining them but in selecting them.’

‘I see,’ I said, not seeing in the least.

‘In fact, it is really too easy,’ said Sir Arthur. ‘The other day I wrote a whole Sherlock Holmes story, and finished it, and played two rounds of golf on the same day. You see – Holmes isn’t *big* enough. Now, if you take Professor Challenger, that’s a different story.’

I knew that he would say that. Spiritualism has given him, in these later years of his life, so absorbing

and so passionate an interest that one can well understand his aversion from such comparatively childish pursuits as the writing of detective-stories. One can see the ardour in his pale, distant eyes, hear it in the very tone of his soft and even voice. I need not here concern myself with that belief. But I cannot forget one thing which he told me. 'There are now between five and six hundred little Spiritualist churches in the kingdom,' he said. 'Most of them are very humble places, with tin roofs and wooden benches. Many of the preachers in these churches are uneducated men, with no gift of speech, with nothing in them but the truth as they see it. You may not think much of the movement in this stage. *But don't forget that it was in exactly this way that Christianity began to sweep the world.*'

I think that the man, whatever his convictions, who scoffs at a spirit like that is worse than a fool. However, I cannot share it, and I would prefer to have recalled Conan Doyle as a calm agnostic, smoking a pipe and dreaming of fresh crimes in the flames of his blazing fire. As it was, before I took my leave he had begun to sneer at Sherlock Holmes again, and that was more than I could bear. For I would rather have one story of Sherlock Holmes than a whole volume of spirit messages from the faintly ridiculous shade of Mr. W. T. Stead.

## XVII

ALICE DELYSIA

*or*

Something Out of a Novel

‘SHE doesn’t get up till twelve. She doesn’t get up till twelve.’

I departed from the rosy glow of Delysia’s dressing-room, and emerged into a peculiarly garish day (for it was after a Wednesday’s *matinée*), muttering this vital information, for fear I should forget it before arriving at my club.

‘She doesn’t get up till twelve.’ That is a sentence of six words, so if I said it two hundred times my article would be written. But even Miss Gertrude Stein, the Picasso of prose, is not given to repeating herself more than fifty times, and, anyway, she writes rot. So that I shall not say it again. Besides, there is no need to do so. There are all sorts of fascinating little details which go with it. Hampstead is hushed until twelve o’clock – at least, as much of Hampstead as Delysia controls. No blade of grass is cut in the garden outside her window, till twelve o’clock. Rigolo – that snowy, idiotic, perfect puppy – must gambol in silence, till twelve o’clock. The house may catch fire, cat-burglars may climb the walls in dozens, but Delysia remains asleep – till twelve o’clock. And that is the secret of her extraordinary vitality.

I don't know any other actress who has quite such strength of mind. This determination of Delysia to have her beauty sleep, come what may, must sometimes make rehearsals a matter of a certain difficulty. Of course, on the eve of a production, she does rise, gaze out on to this curious pre-noon world, shudder slightly, and attend her rehearsal. They say that on such occasions she works with an energy that is quite fierce. But she would far rather be still in bed. I agree with her.

That is part of what I should call the 'Cavallini' side of Delysia (Cavallini, in case you forget, is the heroine of *Romance*). When I had been talking to her in that rosy glow, she had made the usual confession which comédiennes always make — she wanted to act in a straight play. But she did not say it as I have so often heard Miss Tootsy Whatnot say it. There was no sort of 'I think it would be *fearfully* jolly to play Magdah — or Heddah Garbler, or some old thing like that.' No. Delysia curled her hands and opened her eyes to their fullest extent and spoke exactly as Cavallini might have done in similar conditions. 'Soon — yes, soon — I murst pleh a *stret* pleh. Sormthink that 'as gret cormedi, but also sormthink 'ere.' And she put her hands on her heart. 'You onnerstan'? Sormthink with which I can mek them cry. . . . So 'uman . . . deep . . . deep. . . .'

Why did she never play *Romance*? For she *is* Cavallini. I can see her raging and storming, quickly melting, swearing and coaxing, making immortal love — and it would all be part of the day's work.

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

We talk a great deal of nonsense in this country (and others) about Frenchwomen. We endow every Parisienne with *chic*, *élan*, *verve*, and any other threadbare expression that comes into our heads. Why, I do not know, because there are hundreds of Parisiennes who are unutterably dowdy, and have about as much *élan* as a suffragan bishop. But Delysia is the ideal type for a popular novelist who wishes to write about a great, human, and conventionally Parisian actress. She really *has* marvellous *chic*. She really *has* swift storms and sudden sunshines. She really *is* ridiculously generous. She does all the things that the popular novelist would want her to do — gives all her salary one week to less fortunate artists, is wildly extravagant the next, threatens at one moment to slap the face of an unkind critic in a public restaurant, becomes fiercely rustic for a while and plants scores of daffodils in her garden.

These moods — which fit so perfectly with the popular novelist's conception of a star — are largely instrumental in determining the quality of her work. I know some actresses who study a rôle as if they were reading the Litany. They remain cold and detached during the early stages, although they may give superb performances when their play is produced. But Delysia flies at a rôle, with a whirl of pointed fingers and a canter of slim ankles.

'I re-earse on the stej,' she said to me. 'The muve-ment, the gestoor — it come more quicklee. Till a few dez befoor the dress re-earsal I do nort rid my rôle at 'ome. Nort at all. I only rid it on the stej.'

Again, exactly as a popular novelist would wish her

to be. I understand that it is the same with her songs. (I almost wrote 'the sem with hair sonks,' so infectious is her accent.) She has to feel in the mood before she can give the interpretation she wishes to give. Then she catches the idea in a flash, and remembers it. And how delicious is her interpretation! Do you remember 'Ninon' in *As You Were?* :

'Ninon was witty,  
Ninon was pretty,  
Ninon was a naughtee gair-r-rl.'

Never shall I forget her as she sang that song, her white shoulders rising from a Louis Seize dress of flame-coloured velvet, her lips flaming to match her dress, a sparkle of diamonds in the ivory lace around her breast. Nobody could have done it more exquisitely. In its own class it was as perfect as Melba's singing of Rimsky-Korsakoff's 'Chant Hindou.'

Apart from her art, the popular novelist would find all the material that he needed in her life. She has had all the contrasts so dear to the writer of popular fiction. Her very 'discovery' was dramatic. Cochran wanders into the Olympia in Paris. He sees her in a small speaking part. He engages her in London, in 1914, at £6 a week. And to-day – well, it is slightly vulgar to discuss salaries. But I can assure you that it is adequate.

Always there is something of fiction about her career. Even when she is ill, and her voice fails her, she does not go to the obvious places. She retreats, as Hichens or Le Queux would wish her to retreat, to the remotest parts of the Pyrenees, disappears entirely from the

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

world, and communes with Nature. When she wishes for a holiday, she again leaves the obvious places, and departs, as though she were obeying the orders of E. M. Hull, to Algeria, where she meets many sheikhs, captivates them with Parisian *argot*, and darts off into the waste spaces with a falcon on her wrist. She rides well, of course – what actress of her type of fiction does not? – and she has her dramatic exits and her entrances, which read much as though they had been designed to form the climax of some thrilling chapter. Such an entrance was the occasion when, in New York, playing in *Topics of 1923*, she suddenly appeared, at the curtain of the last act, wearing £400,000 worth of diamonds and pearls. . . . Oh, it all fits in superbly!

She is a 'pro,' an actress in the old tradition, breathing 'theatre,' living 'theatre,' not in the tiresome way of one who has any theories about the theatre, or of one who wishes to establish dreary repertory companies in any old barn that may come along, but in the way of one to whom the theatre – the bright, glittering, noisy, commercial theatre – is the great fact about existence. I had always wondered if those great-hearted, moody, generous actresses of fiction ever lived outside the pages of a novel. Now I know.

## XVIII

### DIAGHILEFF

*or*

#### An Inspired Beach-comber

IN the sombre light of the stalls a man in black is quietly sitting. If he were to be described in a single adjective, I should call him smooth. His hair is grey and sleek, his eyeglass rounded, his coat without a crease. Even when he turns, a little languidly, to speak to his companion, the fiery Russian language, which usually sounds so wicked, seems positively amiable.

The rehearsal proceeds. In strange and varying designs the lines of dancers group themselves. Robbed of the aid of costume, against a background of vast stretches of unpainted canvas, the barbaric patterns of their movement stand out with a startling clarity. One sees their rhythms stripped naked, animal and exultant. It is a little frightening, and one feels that it is hardly the place for so proper and urbane a figure as the quiet man in black.

Then suddenly there is a roar. The lines of dancers split asunder and remain motionless. The roar continues. It is a powerful voice, and it is hurling fierce words, which one cannot understand, at the dancers. It comes from the man in black, who is Serge Diaghileff.

I have introduced him thus in the hope that it may



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

indicate something of the fire which smoulders beneath his businesslike exterior. If you were expecting to meet a wild artist, a Da-daist, a gesticulating genius, you will be disappointed. It is better to learn straight away that he was, in his youth, a doctor of law, and that, in appearance, he has never recovered from it.

Keeping this in mind, his artistic beliefs become all the more startling. We have the fruits of those beliefs in many glittering parades. I need no excuse, therefore, for committing to paper some of the sayings which I have heard fall from his lips.

*'The greatest virtue of an artist is infidelity.'* There is a fine creed for you. It is calculated to bring a pretty flush to the cheeks of Sir Frank Dicksee, and might have an almost fatal effect on the Hon. John Collier and the rest of them. Being interpreted, it means that an artist must always be changing his loves and his hates, that he is never stable. At one moment he is worshipping at the tomb of Chopin, at the next he is waving the torch of Stravinsky. His mind is like a child's, open to all things bright and beautiful. He is neither 'modern' nor 'classical' – two disgusting adjectives which ought to be banned from everyday speech. He is simply a living, intensely sensitive creature, for whom, as Gautier said, 'the visible world exists.'

*'An artist is finished when he knows what he is going to do next.'* This really contains the essence of Diaghileff's creed. It lays bare the startling fact that a ballet is, in essence, an improvisation. An idea comes – an echo of a folk-story, a scrap of mythology, perhaps even a faded page in a Victorian magazine – and the seeds of

a ballet are sown. The idea enlarges itself, a composer is found. The ballet grows. The music is written, the choreography is sketched out. The ballet is still growing. But it has not yet, as it were, pushed its head above the ground. That process takes place in the theatre. How, I do not quite know. I have asked him a dozen times, and he cannot, or will not, tell me. All I know is that he watches, through half-closed eyes, and that he sees a thing which pleases or displeases him. If it pleases him, it stands. If it does not, it goes. He does not dance himself, nor paint, and he has only learned the theory of composition. Yet, somehow or other, he knows. And the experts know that he knows, and venerate his advice.

*'The ballet is eternally fresh because of its endless sources of inspiration. Every new composer may inspire a new school of dancing.'* He illustrated this to me by telling the story of the creation of *L'Oiseau de Feu*. In 1909 he happened to wander into a concert in Petrograd. It was a very bad concert, consisting of that type of Russian music which may be described as diabetic — excessively sugary, and calculated to lower the spirits. But there was one exception, a small work by a young man called Stravinsky, of whom nobody had ever heard.

Diaghileff heard this trifle, ascertained the composer's address, screwed his eyeglass into his eye, and departed into the cold streets to send a telegram. Within a few days he had arranged that Stravinsky should write him a ballet. Within a few months that ballet was completed. That, I think, may be called *flair*, even if we give it no higher-sounding name.

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

But, just because Stravinsky wrote a great ballet, Diaghileff does not expect him to turn out ballets like clockwork. He may find in the most unexpected place a new composer who will give him what he wants. The composer may be writing popular songs, or sitting in an attic in the Hebrides, or wallowing behind a beard in the dustiest room of the Royal College of Music. Never mind. Diaghileff will find him out. He will be 'in the air.'

There, that is the phrase I have been seeking – 'in the air.' Diaghileff is a sort of inspired beach-comber. He walks down the street and sees an ex-soldier playing the 'bones' in a drizzling rain. He engages the ex-soldier. He is a decorative and significant part of contemporary life. He looks up in the sky and sees an aeroplane, he goes to Deauville and sees the bathers, he crosses the Channel and watches the sailors, and from these contacts, in some way or other, a ballet is created.

It is all a tremendous improvisation. It seems to me that it is the only form of art in which improvisation is not only possible, but necessary. One is dealing with so sensuous and plastic a material, the human body, and one is moulding that material in conjunction with so many strange and unbridled forces, the force of music, and of theatrical design, which, being constantly under the influence of varying lights and shadows, is not static, but assumes constantly a thousand shades and meanings. To be able to weld these conflicting forces into an harmonious design, or at least into a significant chaos, would seem to be a task calculated to have re-

moved any lingering resemblance to a doctor of law, and to require powers of organization so highly developed that they swamped the creative faculty.

Yet he is creative. He is no mere organizer. That young genius, Vladimir Dukelsky, the composer of the ballet *Zephyr and Flore* (whose sole weakness is a passion for calling upon one at five o'clock in the afternoon for breakfast), told me of the extraordinary capacity that Diaghileff possesses for inspiring those with whom he is working. He does not dictate, he does not even say what is wrong. He sits down, screws his eyeglass, and exudes a beneficent cloud of inspiration. And then, the melodies which had halted kick up their heels and dance, the rhythms which had flagged join hands and caper across the keys, the beauty which had faded blossoms out anew.

I have told you nothing whatever about his method of work, how he gets his ideas, why he is a great maker of ballets. I do not know why. Nobody knows why. Least of all, Diaghileff himself.

## XIX

SIR GERALD DU MAURIER

*or*

Not What you Think

**I**F you were told that a great actor-manager was in the habit of conducting his business by a series of mediæval vows, you might be inclined to doubt it.

Yet Sir Gerald du Maurier has made momentous decisions – decisions which have affected his whole life – by *swearing a vow on a child's heart*. I do not suggest that he does it every day, but he has certainly done it on several unexpected occasions. And having once made such a vow, no power on earth would make him break it.

At first he seems to be the most ordinary, normal, everyday man you have ever met. And then, as though one were exploring a rambling old country house, one suddenly comes upon secret rooms hidden away from the ordinary corridors of life, close-shuttered from the sun of publicity. This business of the vows, for instance, gives him a link with the age of Magic. Again one evening, you may see him standing alone in his garden, listening to the birds, with a rather sentimental expression upon his face, and you learn that, like a brother of Lob, he has taught himself the call of all the birds of England, and can imitate their note. Or you will go driving with him, and come to a certain

village where he will make a strange and inexplicable sign with his fingers – the same sign which he has made since he was a small boy, and which he will make, assuredly, when he is an old man.

And you will say to yourself: 'What *is* he? Half the time that he is talking to me he is pulling my leg with such ingenuous enjoyment that it would be a crime to allow him to know that one saw through it. He adores games, but he does not live for games. He does not make much effort to hear music, but he can be stirred into quite unusual raptures by it. For years he has been playing the same rôles in the theatre, yet, if the truth be known, he can play any rôle. He is always acting, even in his private life, but one knows him for a very sincere friend.' At the end, one concludes that his mind has never really grown up, never emerged from the age of sixteen, that troubled age of smouldering fires and creeping shadows, in which nothing that one does can be explained by the ordinary rules of conduct.

Outwardly, at least, there is much to support this theory. I shall never forget a certain summer afternoon in the red-bricked, shadowy garden of his house at Hampstead. Tennis was in the air, and after the usual two hours' delay, in which one player hunts for his shoes, and another 'pops' over the way for his racquet, and a third mends a hole in the net, four men assembled on the court. I reclined gracefully in a chair, and prepared to watch the game.

I saw no game. For, owing to the impulsive violence with which Sir Gerald hoisted the net, one of the poles supporting it collapsed. Then the fun began. The

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

average man would have decided, after ten minutes' investigation, that the net was permanently disabled. But Sir Gerald refused to believe it. He dug holes in the ground as eagerly as a child digs at the sea. He procured strange and hairy pieces of rope from distant outhouses, and pranced about tying them to anything, vegetable, animal, or mineral, which met his eye. After about half an hour no fewer than five ropes had been twisted round the post and tied to trees, seats, or garden rollers, so that the whole thing looked as though Heath Robinson had been inventing some patent way of catching mice. All the time the net kept collapsing steadily, and the more it collapsed the more did Sir Gerald prance. Long after the rest had retired to whiskies-and-soda and the consolation of bad language, he continued to prance. It made me feel old and haggard to see so much boyishness.

Well, that is a very different sort of man from the standardized Sir Gerald of the picture postcards. But even more startling is the view of him at a rehearsal. He has never been a favourite actor of mine. I recognize his genius; but I am not of his school. I like an actor to be an actor, to have a flourish about him, to perform miracles of virtuosity, to tear a passion to tatters – in other words, to step in the traditions of which Seymour Hicks is so incomparable an exponent. I used to think, too, that du Maurier could only do one thing. But I am beginning to change my mind.

Those who imagine him to be only a 'one-part' man should bribe the door-keeper at some theatre where he is producing a new play, slink into the stalls, and study

him from the darkness. They would witness a curious sight – a sort of human chameleon, marching up and down the stage, changing the entire colour of his personality according to the rôle which he is for the moment illustrating. For when he is producing he plays any part at a second's notice. He can change his sex more easily than I can change my trousers, and listen to the amorous declarations of a juvenile lead as though he really liked it. He can precipitate himself into a state of hysteria with the speed of a sporting Bugatti, and the moment afterwards is playing a love scene with admirable timing and sentiment.

My description sounds dreadfully like one of those rather pathetic music-hall turns in which seedy-looking gentlemen produce a quantity of hats from behind a screen, strike an attitude, and convulse their features into a series of grimaces, so that if the band plays 'Rule, Britannia' and they are winking one eye, you know that they are Nelson, or if the tune is the 'Marseillaise' and the hat of a singular shape, they are either Napoleon or the late Lord Northcliffe.

He is not at all like that. For one thing, he does not impress his own version of a rôle upon any actor until it is absolutely necessary to do so. One hears this sort of tuition: 'Just a minute, old chap. I shouldn't make this man quite such a brute if I were you. After all, he is supposed to be an attractive sort of stiff. Couldn't you – well – like this?' And then the human chameleon steps forward, the face alters, the voice alters, and you have a beautiful little cameo of acting.

That may not excite you very much, but it excites



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

me, simply because I have seen other producers with such entirely different methods. They grip a wretched girl by the elbow and put her through a sort of Prussian drill. Thus: 'When he says, "I love you," step over the door-mat. When you reply, "You mustn't" – draw back on the left foot, bite your lip, and grasp the door-knob firmly between the thumb and third finger of the right hand.'

The only occasion on which du Maurier does that sort of thing is when he is dealing with a complete novice. Then there is fun – even, we would imagine, for the novice. For example: 'Look here. Motion picture stuff. See? Take it in three movements. When you say, "Oh, George!" step forward and register surprise. When, etc.' And thus, without words, silently, twisting his face into a series of standard emotions, he goes through the passage, over and over again, until the pupil gets his meaning. If I myself had to do that sort of thing for a living, on a cold, dusty stage, before a quantity of strangers, I should throw myself into the Thames; but that is beside the point. The point is that du Maurier does it extremely well.

## XX

EPSTEIN

*or*

What is Beauty?

THE attitude of the great British public towards Mr. Jacob Epstein is as insolent as it is unintelligent. That they should be unable to understand him, unable to accept the tremendous emotional heritage which he is bequeathing – these things are their misfortune rather than their fault. But their own blindness is no excuse for the torrents of mockery, abuse, and slander which have poured from the thick lips of so many ‘Artists of the Old School,’ ‘Patriots,’ ‘Anglo-Indian Colonels,’ and ‘Mothers of Six.’ It has always struck me as a little foolish that the English should make so much fuss about the Spanish habit of baiting bulls when they show themselves such wonderful experts in the more savage game of baiting artists.

Look at it in this way – in Epstein’s own words. ‘Art is the one thing about which everybody is allowed to have an opinion,’ he said. ‘If you permitted people to storm the doors of Harley Street and dictate to the doctors as to how they were to do their job, those people would quite rightly be turned out. If they marched into the War Office and began to give their opinions on the conduct of a campaign, they would be shown the door. And yet any doctor or colonel considers that his

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME'

opinions about art are as good as anybody else's – the artist's included. If I had studied surgery for five years, I should be considered expert enough to carve a human body. But although I have studied sculpture all my life, I am not considered to know as much about my job as the urchin who throws stones at my work. It's a little hard.'

It is. I looked at him – not, I must admit, for the first time, but in the light of the criticisms which have recently been hurled at him. He is called 'cruel,' 'Bolshevik,' and 'brutalized.' Yet if ever there was a gentle creature, courteous, abnormally sensitive, it is Epstein. I hate his shirts, and I wish he would brush his hair, but one cannot have everything. After all, he has eyes like a mild, puzzled pony, a quiet, musical voice, and soft white hands. He has a smile which quickly shines and quickly fades, and an expression which I can only describe as 'worshipful,' as though he were perpetually giving thanks for the beauty which he has been permitted to see and to interpret.

We were talking in his studio in Guilford Street. All around us, like frozen spirits, were busts, sketches, figures. I spied that supremely beautiful head which he executed of his wife. It looks downward, and round the hair is draped, in curves of melancholy genius, a mantilla. 'Good Lord!' I said to him. 'People say you have no technique. This thing's a triumph of technique even if it were nothing else.' He smiled. 'Well, I *have* studied, you see. At the Beaux Arts. The most classical and conventional of all schools. And after-

wards . . . but then, people have forgotten that. So why bother to remind them?’

I have no false modesty about asking obvious questions. If I had ever encountered Mrs. Beeton I should have asked her if she suffered from indigestion. Had I met Wainwright, that perfect poisoner, I should have tried to obtain the address of his chemist. And the most obvious puzzle of the sculptor’s profession, which most people ignore, is the manner in which he keeps alive ‘the frenzy of creation’ in spite of the fact that he is working, let us say, on a solid face of rock, or at best with clay which must cool and be subjected to endless processes. A sonnet can be improvised in the heat of the moment, a melody may be written almost as quickly as it sings itself through the head. But to make a piece of stone surge into life . . .

Well, the procedure, according to Epstein, is something like this. Imagine that he is making a bust of a woman. Immediately he sees that woman he gains a certain very definite impression, not only of her features, but of her spirit. If he sees her again, that knowledge will deepen, but the first impression remains the emotional basis from which he works.

The mood of work comes upon him, and he begins. But there are many difficult and tedious stages before the goal is reached.

First, like an architect building a house, he has to build his foundations. Most people seem to imagine that Epstein does not worry about foundations. They appear to think that he gets slightly tight and kicks his material about with his boots. I wish they could have

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

seen him bending down before one of his own busts, fingering it gently with very white fingers, saying:

'You see, you've got to consider the bones first of all. Whenever I look at a face, I see the bones under the skin. The whole face hangs from the cheek-bones. Take those away and the face ceases to exist. Then there are certain definite proportions which you must observe between the forehead and the mouth, and the mouth and the chin. You can't take liberties until those things are at least *realized*. When you've realized them, your emotional state itself dictates the actual form of your work. It becomes something which commands *you*. It moulds you just as much as you mould it.'

He was speaking in front of a very tender and beautiful bust of a little child, with arms held out gravely, in play or in supplication. The cheeks were smooth and rounded, the lips full and pouting. And yet the bones were there. They were underneath, invisible, but they were *there*. The thing had substance as well as surface—more than one can say of most modern sculpture.

Inevitably we talked about Rima. He pointed out to me a very interesting phenomenon. The average man, if asked to guess its dimensions, would probably say six feet by eleven. As a matter of fact, it is only four feet by six—one of the most remarkable examples of magnitude in miniature which sculpture can show. However, as much fuss has been made about it as if it had been a hundred yards long and fifty feet high, so Mr. Epstein cannot complain.

'I wanted to get, above all, the sense of movement,' he said. 'It wasn't easy. I had only my small piece of stone, and on it I had promised to produce not only the figure of Rima, but the forms of birds as well. People have informed me that the work is monstrous, and that I did it for a stunt. They imagine I didn't *feel* what I produced. If they only knew!'

He was silent. Behind him lowered a bust of Sunita – the bronze head of a woman with heavy eyelids, thick lips, and bony forehead. It was the subject of particularly idiotic comments from many of the crowds who thronged his last exhibition. They said, 'Lord! What a woman! Like a negress with smallpox. . . .'

But as I stared at that bust, hypnotized, it seemed to fill the room with savage beauty. The atmosphere became troubled. It was as though there were some virtue escaping from the cold bronze which charged the ether with its own spirit, entering one's veins, stirring one's brain. The metal sang.

I wish that the British public would bathe its eyes and purge its brain. Yet I suppose that in its ignorance is a form of bliss. For you cannot see Epstein and remain the same.

## XXI

GEORGE GERSHWIN

*or*

A Drunken Schubert

I AM going to begin right in the middle, because until I have made George Gershwin play you his first piano concerto you will probably regard him (as do most of our half-baked critics) as a mere pedlar of common tunes, like his 'Swanee,' and 'Lady, Be Good.' So you must imagine a swarthy young man of twenty-seven, seated at a piano by the open window of a room in Pall Mall not long ago, lifting his fingers and beginning to play. The twilight was fast fading when he sat down, and by the time he had finished it was almost dark, and the street lamps were lit. Yet in that brief period I had passed through one of the most singular musical experiences I have known.

I ought to be slightly drunk to be able to describe it properly, for it was the music of intoxication. Only by ragged words, by a mass of stage effects, by strident and jagged adjectives could one hope to recapture on the printed page the entangled and enticing rhythms which floated across the darkening room.

How can I describe those rhythms? Everybody is acquainted, of course, with the ordinary jazz tricks. Most of them consist in making a tune hiccup, by a judicious administration of quavers at the beginning of

a bar. Or else, a simple phrase of six quavers, demanding a three-four tempo, is put into a strait-waistcoat of common time, and made to wriggle about with most entertaining antics. Everybody knows these little devices. They are as old as Bach, and probably older.

I realized in the first five minutes that Gershwin was going far beyond that in his concerto. It would need a very complicated series of mathematical charts to explain exactly what he *was* doing; and even when one had explained it, the number of people who could play the result would, I imagine, be not greater than those who, according to Mr. Einstein, comprehend the theory of relativity. To put it in a non-technical way, he was taking a quantity of strictly opposed rhythms and, by some magic counterpoint of his own, weaving them into a glittering mass which was at once as well ordered as a route march and as drunken as an orgy.

Yet beautiful. *Really* beautiful. The visions that this concerto called up before me! I loathe people who make pictures out of music, who grin vacuously and refer to waterfalls when they hear a Liszt cadenza, who poignantly recall their first seduction when listening to a sentimental waltz by Chaminade, and to whom the Preludes of Chopin mean nothing more than rain dripping on a roof or Georges Sand having the vapours. The world is full of such people, and I have always flattered myself that I was not of their number. Apparently I was mistaken.

For as I listened it seemed that the whole of new America was blossoming into beauty before me. The



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

phrases swept up the piano with the stern, unfaltering grace of a skyscraper. Ever and anon the bass would take it into its head to go mad, with the fierce, orgiastic madness of a negro. There were passages vivid and humorous – a sort of chattering of Broadway chorus girls drinking mint julep at Child's. There were slow, secretive melodies that had in them something of the mystery of vast forests. The tunes clashed and fought, degenerated, were made clean again, joined together, and scampered madly over the keyboard in a final rush which was as breathless as the thundering herd over the prairies of the West.

When it was all over, and the aftermath of silence had gradually been penetrated by the noises of everyday life from the streets outside, I felt that the occasion was one for repeating what Schumann said after hearing Chopin for the first time: 'Hats off, gentlemen – a genius.' Only there were no hats to take off, and we should both have been embarrassed by so un-English a display of emotion. I therefore turned to one of the most complicated pages and asked him, quite bluntly, how it was done.

'I don't know.'

'Please play this bit very slowly.'

He played it. There were three distinct rhythms fighting each other – two in the treble and one in the bass. I began to laugh.

'What are you laughing at?'

'All those rhythms – scrapping. How *do* you make them fight like that?'

He shook his head, and went on playing.

'I feel things inside, and then I work' them out — that's all.'

'You must have felt pretty volcanic when you wrote this. Do you always feel volcanic?'

'No. An ordinary jazz tune's different.'

While he had been talking, he had been occasionally dabbling at the keyboard with his right hand. Little bits of tunes were born, floated away, died. Now and then he would play a phrase twice, three times, and then smother it with a discord, as though he did not wish to claim its paternity. Then, suddenly, a rather fascinating phrase came out.

'I say,' I said, 'I rather like that.'

'So do I.' He played it again, improvising a 'following' theme. 'It's got possibilities. But it's really a Charleston tune, and it hasn't got a Charleston rhythm.' At which he proceeded to maltreat that poor tune as few tunes have been maltreated. Over and over again he played it, until I felt that I never wanted to hear it again. Then, when it seemed perfect, he said: 'Well, at any rate, that's a beginning.'

When I went to the first night of 'Lady, Be Good' I heard the tune that had been begun that evening. You have probably heard it, too.

There — I am writing on silent paper, which has no power of harmony or discord, and I will cease from these descriptions of an art which cannot be described. But before I end, I want to tell what I should have told in the first few lines — how Gershwin, who has now an income much greater than the President of the United

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

States, began. He said: 'I began a few years ago in a little music-publishing house on Broadway. Every day at nine o'clock I was there at the piano, playing popular tunes for anybody who came along. Coloured people used to come in and get me to play them "God Send You Back to Me" in seven keys. Chorus ladies used to breathe down my neck. Some of the customers treated one like dirt. Others were charming. Among the latter was Fred Astaire.

'It was at a time when Fred and Adèle were doing a little vaudeville show of their own. Fred used to come in sometimes to hear the new songs. I remember saying to him once, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if one day I could write a show of my own, and you and Adèle could star in it?" We just laughed then. But it came true.'

It certainly did.

## XXII

EUGENE GOOSSENS

*or*

Not so Cold as he Looks

TEN years ago, before seven hundred callous school-boys, I stood up and conducted an orchestra, for the first, and probably the last, time in my life. The piece was Haydn's Toy Symphony, and the captain of the fifteen was playing the 'clappers.' Having a healthy respect for this youth, I encouraged him to clap as loudly as he liked, which he did, entirely drowning the noise made by the rest of the performers. You will therefore agree that I am well qualified to write about Mr. Eugene Goossens, because I, too, have experienced the intoxication of wielding the baton.

That seems to me the most interesting part of it all (at least, for the layman) — the intoxication, the excitement of it all — and I was glad to learn that Goossens still feels it, because we are usually told that as soon as one can do anything perfectly, one ceases to wish to do it at all.

'To conduct a perfect orchestra is the most tremendously exciting thing in the world,' he told me. 'It gives you a feeling of power that is almost immoral. It's like being given a sixth sense, or driving a high-speed car for the first time, or being able to fly like a bird. It's like so many things that I can't begin to explain. But I

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

do know it's the most exhilarating sensation that can ever be known to man.

'Take the Boston Symphony Orchestra. On the first occasion that I conducted them we were playing the Brahms Fourth Symphony. There was hardly any time for rehearsal. I could merely point out to them a few changes in phrasing, a few alterations from slurred to *détaché* bowing. But when we played it in public – my God! They were so sensitive that one was almost frightened. They interpreted the slightest indication of emotion. As a result, one's own emotional capacity was glorified to an astonishing degree. One really felt a god.'

'But can you really let yourself go?' I asked him. 'In the same way that a pianist can let himself go? Supposing you were playing an Albeniz prelude on the piano. If you knew it quite perfectly you wouldn't have to think of your fingers at all. You could just close your eyes and gallop ahead, giving full rein to your emotions. But you can never do that with an orchestra, can you?'

'Yes, you can. That's the whole fun of it. With a perfect orchestra you can do what you like. It is literally true that you can alter the whole character of a performance by lifting your little finger. Think what that means. You can draw a sort of immense emotional throb out of the air merely by curving your hand. You can get brilliant waves of sound merely by a twist of the wrist. You can make sudden and absolute silence by a gesture. It is the most wonderful of all sensations that any man can conceive. It really oughtn't to be allowed.'

One gains an impression of what he feels by watching

him conduct a ballet like *Les Noces* — that masterpiece of Stravinsky which Mr. Noel Coward and Mr. Hannen Swaffer, poor things, seem to find a little beyond them. As he is conducting it, one has the impression of a swimmer cutting strongly through a rough sea. Discord surges and swirls around him, rhythms chop and change like a swift current, a sudden wind of melody blows straight towards him, dies down, and returns more fiercely than ever, from another angle. Yet all the time his sure arm is beating aloft, subduing these musical elements, creating rhythm out of successive waves of chaos. You may think that is an exaggerated description of *Noces*. If so, you have not heard it.

'It is much the most difficult work I have ever conducted,' he told me. 'Look at the score of it.'

I looked. He showed me a passage which was about as rhythmical as an intoxicated kangaroo. In order that you may see for yourself the difficulty of the passage, which is typical of the whole work, here are the successive changes in tempo in twelve bars:

$$\begin{array}{cccccccccccc} \frac{3}{4} & \frac{4}{4} & \frac{5}{8} & \frac{4}{4} & \frac{5}{8} & \frac{3}{4} & \frac{5}{8} & \frac{3}{4} & \frac{6}{8} & \frac{7}{8} & \frac{9}{8} & \frac{4}{4} \\ 4 & 4 & 8 & 4 & 8 & 4 & 8 & 4 & 8 & 8 & 8 & 4 \end{array}$$

Those, I must repeat, are consecutive bars. Try to tap them out with your foot. By the end of the third bar you will have cramp and wrinkles round the eyes. Then try to imagine conducting them before a crowded and critical house, knowing that the slightest slip will plunge your orchestra into chaos. Add to that a ballet

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

of intense elaboration, in which the performers themselves are often dancing *against* the orchestra, and are looking to you to direct them. Then you may perhaps be inclined to alter your opinion, if you ever held it, that the conductor is merely a stick-wagger, who serves a vaguely useful purpose in seeing that the National Anthem is sung in time.

Only a man who combined authority with exceptional sensitiveness could conduct *Noces* at all. And delicacy of sense has its disadvantages. I suspected it before he had actually confessed it to me, because I had watched him during one of the performances when certain members of the audience were inclined to scoff. You know the sort of people. They have large red hands, they drink tea in the intervals, and 'they know a tune when they hear it.' Their brains being too thick to distinguish Stravinsky's very definite and beautiful tunes, they felt themselves cheated, and, after the manner of their kind, made curious noises in their throats, rustled their programmes, and breathed platitudes down each other's necks.

Goossens sensed them. One could tell it from his spine. It was curved into an attitude of dumb protest. He could do nothing about it, but one knew what he was going through. And, as he afterwards said: 'I could have turned round and thrown my stick at those people. If they knew what they were doing, the agony they were causing, they wouldn't do it. Because one is aware in thirty seconds if any section of the audience is hostile. And to have to work oneself up into a state of emotion before such people, and keep one's mind on

the job at the same time – it's rather hard, to say the least of it.'

It is. And it is equally hard to realize that there are still people who think of the conductor as a sort of drone, unjustly lording it over a hive of industrious, buzzing bees. Some of the things which seem so very easy to us are really fiendishly difficult. Consider a simple recitative in a Mozart opera. As Goossens said: 'It is incredibly hard to get a clean rendering. It isn't only a question of beating a series of simple chords into their right place. You haven't only to remember the notes the orchestra play. You have to remember the notes they *don't* play. And if, at the end of three empty bars, you don't bring down your stick properly, or you falter, or they even imagine that you aren't quite decided – the whole thing goes to pot.'

Richter, that great old man, once said that 'the hardest thing in the world was to start an orchestra, and the next hardest to stop it.' Let us offer due prayers to the gods of music that it may be a long time before Goossens stops his orchestra for the last time.



## XXIII

PHILIP GUEDALLA

*or*

### The Importance of Waste-Paper Baskets

EVERY morning, at the hour of nine, a shadow is cast over the pictures that hang on the staircase of a house in Hyde Park Street. The pictures, one must know, are exclusively the work of Mr. Beerbohm, and a fervent loyalist would wish, indeed, that the shadow might never be lifted from them, for they portray many High Persons in attitudes of limp abandonment. But the shadow passes quickly, glides across the hall, and vanishes through the front door.

On Camden Hill there is a studio. Thither the shadow wends its way. As we note it, cast in the spring sunshine over the pavements that lead one to the enchantments of Notting Hill Gate, we observe a bowler hat, an attaché case, and a profile that owes something to Byron and more to Beckett. In short, since I cannot parody his style any longer, we observe Mr. Philip Guedalla on his way to work.

It all sounds very mysterious, but in reality there is no mystery. I cannot 'produce' him in a garret, surrounded by cracked busts of Victorian statesmen, I cannot even provide the mellow setting of a university library, nor conjure up the musty smell of old books. I can only bring before you this remote studio in Camden

Hill, which is situated in a highly respectable house, is almost dustless, and contains nothing more romantic than two chairs and a table. I cannot even show you the historian at work over his table, because he happens to write in his arm-chair. Indeed, it is characteristic of him to remark that 'the reason why so little real history is written is because historians cling to their desks, while their histories drift over the edge, and are lost.'

The whole point of this elaborate introduction, however, is to dispel from the mind of the British public the idea that Mr. Guedalla is an amateur. It seems a little ridiculous that the only Englishman who is writing real history – the only Englishman who is breathing life into the lay figures who have lain so heavily upon our childish imaginations – should still be comparatively ignored by that curious concensus of prejudice and ignorance which is labelled 'University opinion.' At Oxford Guedalla is not *mal vu*. He is hardly *vu* at all. Of course there are exceptions – that keen spirit, the late Master of Balliol, was one of the first to recognize his genius – but it must be a little tiresome for any historian to have to wait for a Master of Balliol to prove his particular rule.

What is the reason for it all? Is it because the dons still remember him as an undergraduate – a pale, dark youth, spitting epigrams under the chestnut trees in the quad? Or does his legal training hover about him, detracting from the glamour of the literateur? Or do the critics recall his forensic triumphs in the courts of law? I cannot say. I cannot even care. I can only draw your

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

attention to a man, still young, with a brilliant scholastic background, who has thrown up a great career at the Bar, and jettisoned a possible parliamentary career, because of a singular desire to write about the past, even if it means a daily promenade to Campden Hill to escape from the calls of everyday life.

Yet, I think, he should commend himself to us, in spite of this secret studio. Englishmen, as Mr. Michael Arlen has recently reminded us, dearly love an amateur – or, at least, a man who has the decency to pretend to be an amateur. Our most successful prime ministers have ever seemed to put their pipes before their patriotism – they have, as it were, strayed into Downing Street by chance, turning into that grey cul-de-sac accidentally, on their way to a leisurely promenade along the Thames Embankment. For that reason Englishmen should dearly love Philip Guedalla, for he has all the trappings of the amateur. After all, his first historical essays were composed in those narrow passages which debouch from the roaring thoroughfare of Fleet Street into the tranquil spaces of the Temple. For ten busy years he was a barrister. The first phrases of some of his most polished essays were evolved literally *en marche*, before the busy legal day began. Past and present, history and law, waged eternal battle in his brain. He told me of a morning when he was trying to write an account of the battle of Magenta. There he sat, pale and swarthy, in his office, the rattle of ancient muskets in his head, the smell of ancient powder in his nostrils, and all the time the telephone bell was ringing, and a pestilent clerk was popping his head through the

door, reminding him that he must shortly appear in court to settle the undefended divorce of a West End manservant. Such is the agility of his mind that he was able to defend the manservant and return to Magenta. But one cannot continue these quick changes indefinitely. One must either be a lawyer or an historian. One cannot be both. Guedalla chose to be the latter. It was a very difficult choice. And I like to think that in spite of that choice (which was Heroic with a capital H), he has retained his delicate air of a dilettante.

For always there is an impression of detachment between his life and his letters – as though he were something a little un-English, standing aside, faintly mocking. One feels that in his breast pocket he carries a passport ordering all and sundry to give him free passage through our islands in the name of – Ruritania? No – not Ruritania, for no Ruritanian, surely, could be so self-assured, even in these days when a Balkan origin confers upon one the power of life and death over millions of Teutonic cousins. Say rather of some mythical country, ancient but not *démodé*, a country where there is still patronage, still a reverence for letters, and – most important of all – still a large home market in waste-paper baskets.

Waste-paper baskets – (I remember certain earnest youths at Oxford who used to call them wagger-pagger-baggers) – are to Philip Guedalla one of the most essential perquisites of the man of letters. I asked him how he managed to produce so many epigrams – or, to put it more delicately, how his pages came to be starred with so many felicitous phrases. I obtained no more

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

explicit reply than 'Waste-paper baskets.' He writes, at most, 750 words a day. He writes and re-writes. He polishes and re-polishes. He works in solitude. He works with agony. He works with sweat. And that is the only way to work at all. *Palmerston* was written in the heart of the country. All day and every day, from the middle of June to the middle of October, that ebullient figure was being brought back to life, in a quiet room that echoed only to the sound of untutored thrushes. Guedalla has called *Palmerston* 'The last candle of the eighteenth century' – (an exquisite phrase) – and though I know little of the chandler's craft, I can see an analogy between the fashioning of a candle and the construction of this work. Drop by drop the candle grows to stature, purified by many processes, held by a single thread of wick. Line by line the book grows too, purified by many painful erasures and alterations, held together by a slender but luminous thread of narrative. And just as there comes to a candle a sudden, star-like moment when it flames to life, so, when he wrote that book, there came a moment when, at *Palmerston's* death, the figure over which he had been labouring arose and spoke. That was the moment when he wrote . . . 'And so, the last candle of the eighteenth century was out.'

In this miniature sketch I cannot possibly hope to indicate why Guedalla seems to me so essentially a figure of the century which has so recently gone by. Yet – think for a moment. He is an historian – and who can we count among twentieth-century historians? He is a scrupulous man of letters – and who, save for a

languid figure at Rapallo and the gawky biographer of Queen Victoria, can we cite in that capacity? He is, in spite of his appearance, desperately in earnest. And is not that, in 1927, a little odd? Indeed, I fail to see why I should not end this essay with the purple sentence, which, I confess, has been yellowing for days on my desk: 'We may offer thanks that many years must run before the last candle of the nineteenth century is out.'

## XXIV

SACHA GUITRY

or

A Man of Honour

Nobody else could possibly have worn so superbly frivolous a dressing-gown with such dignity. Flowers and leaves and buds were stamped thereon, and the collar had an abandoned roll at the neck. But as he wore it, it became imperial. He walked up and down the room like some stately and sacred bird – I should like to say a grey crane, but it would sound as though I did not appreciate him at his true worth – which indeed I do.

For he had a philosophy to give to me, on this particular morning when we talked – a philosophy which I would pass on to all whom it may concern. It may be summed up by copying down his first phrase: *'In art, I don't like anecdotes.'*

That, by itself, is meaningless, but an extract from my diary will give it significance. 'I don't see why drama should be regarded as something so entirely different from the other arts, such as painting,' said Sacha, speaking with that grave, gracious French that gives an almost sensuous satisfaction when one listens to him. 'The painter is allowed to use pastels, to give an impression in water-colours, to produce an unfinished draft, or to make sketches.' (He used the word

*esquisses*.) 'Now, to me a sketch is a very beautiful thing. Some sketches too, in which one is allowed to guess the formation of a body, and is merely given an exquisite face, a line of the neck, and perhaps a wandering hand, or merely a piece of drapery – we do not complain of *them*. Why, therefore, should we complain when the same thing is done on the stage? Why should we not have our dramatic *esquisses*? Why should we be perpetually bound by these maddening demands for cut-and-dried "stories," anecdotes, as though we were children who had to be tempted with a fairy-tale?'

Now, this is a very important and a very vital comment on dramatic æsthetics. It is contrary to all that abominable collection of second-hand thoughts which are classified under the heading of 'recognized principles.' It is contrary to the gospel according to Mr. George G. Nathan or any of the other dramatic wise-acres. We have always presumed, as a sort of natural law, that a play must tell a story. No play, we are told, even begins to be a play unless it is a story. And, even if *were* a play, it would not have the remotest chance of success with the general public without a story.

Well, here is M. Sacha Guitry who comes along telling me that this theory is bunkum. And not only saying it, but proving it in that hardest of all æsthetic examination halls, the box-office. He writes a play about nothing, and it is a colossal success.

Think of the prospect which that opens up! Think of the divine futilities which it makes possible! It means that a dramatist will be able to take a personality like, let us say, Miss Ethel Barrymore, and simply let



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

that personality rip. He will be able to stand her in the middle of the stage, unhampered by exits or entrances, telling us no tale, worrying us with no problems, beguiling us only by the fact that she is what she is. We shall be able to have plays that end in a glorious uncertainty, sending us troubled and unhappy into the night; we shall be able . . .

I am raving, of course. I know as well as you that it is not in mortals to sit for two and a half hours in a theatre without some form of tale being told to them. We realized *that* in *Heartbreak House*, which is about as brilliant a piece of nothingness as we can hope to expect. Still, I believe there are exceptions, and I believe that the present era is ripe for the presentation of those exceptions. We no longer regard life as something rounded and complete. Life to-day is a thing with jagged edges, boundaries that are ill-defined, of a shape and substance doubtful. Why not, then, in the counterfeit of life that is spread before us on the stage, adapt our form to our philosophy – or rather, our lack of form to our lack of philosophy?

‘I once wrote a play,’ he told me, ‘called *Je t’aime*. There were five acts in it, and nothing whatever happened in those five acts. *Nothing*. There was no plot, no complications, no entanglements. *On parle, on aime, on cause, on sort, on revient – voilà tout*. That play was one of my greatest successes. And I will tell you that while I was playing it I felt always filled with an extraordinary happiness. Because I would look out, beyond the glare of the footlights, into the dusk of the theatre, and I would see men and women sitting next to each

other, holding hands. In the first act they would be sitting upright, in the second they leant towards one another, in the third a hand stole into another hand. What could be more wonderful than that?

What indeed? But I am too much in love with his theories. Let me return to the man himself. Beginnings are always exciting, and Sacha's beginning was more exciting than most. He was regarded as an idiot at school. 'I always remained in the sixth form,' he said — and the sixth form in a French school is the lowest of the lot. 'They told me I would never do anything. It was thought to be a strange phenomenon that so foolish a son should be born of so brilliant a father.

'Then, when I was seventeen, I wrote a play. I wrote it to astonish my father. It was called *Nono*, and it was produced (I think on its own merits) at the Théâtre des Maturins. I was still at school at the time. It was a great success.'

That is one of the best examples of hereditary genius that literary history can afford. That a boy of seventeen, undistinguished in any scholastic attainments, should at the age of seventeen write a play and have it successfully produced is astonishing enough; but that he should write a *good* play is more astonishing still. For *Nono*, as the play was called, *is* a good play. It has been revived no fewer than seven times, and each time with greater success.

That is why Sacha cannot tell you whether he has developed as an artist. Since then he has written no fewer than sixty-one pieces, but he is just as pleased with *Nono* as with *Mozart*. For always he has written,

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

to use his own words, '*pour plaire à une dizaine des personnes.*' Those ten figures have constantly hovered round his desk, directed his pen with unseen fingers, lit his pages with the lamp of their own genius. Among them are men like Anatole France, Octave Mirbeau, and Marcel Schwab. They have, I think you will agree, proved worthier taskmasters than any public, or any box-office.

There – I have said nothing about his acting; but you can see that for yourself, judge the technique by which he obtains his sense of repose – his distinction between the 'vrai' and the 'vraisemblable.' Nor have I dwelt on the perpetual romance of his love for Yvonne Printemps; but that, after all, is common property. I only trust that I have elucidated his theories and made you realize that he is of that rare and honourable class – an artist who has 'stuck to his guns.'

## XXV

SEYMOUR HICKS

*or*

A Spendthrift of Genius

THE most vivid of all my early memories of Seymour Hicks is intimately connected with a volcano. We were in the same boat, bound for Australia, and I was coming on deck as we steamed out of Naples at dusk. The ship was moving very slowly, and Hicks, for once in a way, was not moving at all. He was silhouetted against Vesuvius, the pert, eager profile standing out jet black against a haze of murky crimson. Being, in those days, exceedingly young, I stayed where I was, preparing myself for the immediate delivery of some of the better-known soliloquies. The ship glided on; Seymour remained rapt, and then suddenly he turned. 'That,' he said, 'is one of the best back-cloths that Harker ever painted.'

It was perhaps the consciousness that he was in the presence of an even more powerful volcano than himself which caused him, for those few moments, to relax. In life he never relaxes. On the stage, yes. Who has not been charmed by those little spells of quietude which he gives us, with such exquisite precision, even in the middle of his most turbulent performances? But in life, no. He is a spendthrift of life. You ring him up in the morning and you receive, at the other end of the

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

wire, more concentrated energy in two minutes than you receive in a whole season of broadcasting. You may explain it by an abnormally active pituitary gland, or by an excellent liver, or by the fact that he was born in Jersey. (Was he, by the way?) You can explain it as you will, but you cannot emulate it, nor find its parallel in any of the figures that throng the English stage to-day.

To return to my touching picture of Hicks against Vesuvius. The remark about the Harker back-cloth is really significant. It tells the first thing about him — that he could never have been anything but an actor. He is an Actor with a capital A. The whole glorious tradition of professionalism is his. He is not an actor *malgré lui*. He is not a golfer who occasionally condescends to wear tights instead of plus-fours, to the ecstasy of the present generation of half-wits who gibber from the pit. He is not a dear, sweet thing with a cousin in the Peerage, covered with asterisks. He is an actor who does not pretend to be anything else — who would, indeed, scorn to be anything else.

Thank God for that! If I am in a theatre, then I want to know that I am in a theatre. I care nothing for the fact that I may possibly come out of the theatre knowing more about the sexual irregularities of Connecticut than when I entered it. I care not at all for the fact that behind me Miss Gossip may be gurgling to herself at the sight of so many celebrities. I want to see Acting. And when Seymour is playing, I see it.

Study his performance in this latest play — *Mr. What's His Name?* The second act is drawing to a

close. All the evening we have been borne on the wings of pure farce – the farce of a man who for five years has lost his memory. Suddenly he discovers the truth of his identity, with all the complications which such a discovery implies. Seymour is standing in the centre of the stage, surrounded by the rest of the company. There is a moment's silence – the sort of silence which comes after a great pianist has struck a single chord to prepare our minds for a flight of melody. Instantly the tension in the audience tightens. Instead of seven hundred men and women, there is only a unit. It is as though we were welded together, isolated from the rest of the world. And it is as though Seymour were suddenly disembodied – speaking to us out of space – with a voice which, in such moments, conveys infinitely more than the trite words themselves.

It is a little difficult to dissociate Seymour from his art, so closely are the two connected. He is one of the last of those men who were brought up in the tradition of the great wits – of whom future memoir-writers may say: 'Dined at the Garrick last night. Seymour was there, and – and –, and he kept a table of fifteen of us in a perpetual hubbub of laughter.' I have seen him do it, and his method – if you can discuss the method of so champagne-like an art – is instructive. Just as Gide remarked of Wilde: '*Il ne causait pas – il contait,*' so one might remark of Seymour, '*Il ne cause pas – il récite.*' By which I do not mean that he stands on his chair narrating the fortunes of the boy on the burning deck (fortunes which seem to vary so strangely on each repetition), but that he is at his best in a monologue. He

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

cannot help monopolizing the conversation, because nobody wants him to do anything else. And so he leans forward, and the words bubble from his mouth, and the spirit of laughter hovers round the table. His body is still, but his mind turns somersaults. There is infinite variety, not only in the matter of his talk, but in its manner. He knows how to whisper, yet he can roar you as gently as any sucking dove. He can send his words scattering before him like leaves before an autumn wind, or he can send them out slowly, in marching order. He has a dozen masks of comedy to assume at will – from that which bears only the shadow of a smile to that of the buffoon with crimson nose and coarse, cracking lips.

But there – what is all this to you if you have not heard him? Most of you won't believe it, and even if you do, you won't be able to do anything about it. So why did I write that lyrical passage, which has probably given you the impression that Seymour is in a perpetual state of intoxication? Simply because I am filled with a melancholy consciousness of the transience of such things. A great talker; a great singer; a great actor: we can only say 'he was wonderful to-night' – and there the matter ends. The day will come when he will be wonderful no more. And then, if we survive him, we shall have only a memory, fading rapidly, a memory which we pathetically try to refresh by repeating the old phrases which once came so eagerly to our lips: 'He was wonderful to-night.' That is one of the saddest sentences in a world of sad sentences, because by the time one has said it, the wonder has departed, flown into

thin air, to be recaptured, perhaps a dozen times, a hundred times, but not for ever. 'Not marble, nor the gilded monument of princes' – not even a powerful rhyme, merely the memory of a genius of comedy dancing before us, farther and farther away, until he is lost to view.

And now – this must stop. When I next see Seymour he will probably accuse me of composing a funeral address. But since you will all be seeing him within the next few months, I shall not really feel very guilty about it.



## XXVI

ANTHONY HOPE

*or*

Anything but Senile

LADY (*looking in through door*). 'Port Said is in Egypt, isn't it?'

SIR ANTHONY (*from depths of arm-chair*). 'Well, it used to be. But it may be in Czecho-Slovakia now. The map's been altered a good deal since my young days.'

THE scene of this curious scrap of dialogue was a quiet study, where, from the magic union of ink and paper, many romantic figures have been born. And though Sir Anthony's reply was only a post-prandial flippancy, it seemed to me to be rather typical of his attitude to-day. It is an attitude in which he draws a little aside, saying to himself and to others that he is of a previous generation, and has no part in the present, but saying it with so delicate an irony that he destroys the illusion he would apparently wish to create.

For, after all, even if Port Said has been annexed by Czecho-Slovakia (has it, by the way?) those other lands which he himself created, lands lying under skies which are always tinged with royal purple, show no signs of being conquered by any other popular novelist. And even if he does refer to himself, on every possible occasion, as a 'senile shade,' the senility itself becomes

shadowy when one sees him rise to his feet, after a beaker of red wine, and entertain a table of undergraduates with a wit which has in it more than an echo of the Oxford Union.

But the disguise of Age is a graceful one, and from behind it Anthony Hope said some very honest things to me on that winter afternoon — things so honest that some of his fellow-craftsmen might feel inclined to contest them with violence. Thus:

‘Nearly every writer has said all he has to say in fifteen years.’

That, from a man who has been writing for a good deal more than fifteen years, is not so bad. To give his exact words, he said: ‘I think that if you study the lives of most writers, you will find that their good work — the work which will live after them — was all done in the space of about fifteen years. There are brilliant exceptions, of course. Hardy suddenly flung *The Dynasts* at an astonished world, seven years after he had finished writing novels at all. And Shaw . . .’

I interrupted him. ‘I seem to remember a preface by Shaw, written some years ago, in which he refers to the inspirations of his youth as a flooding stream from which he could draw buckets at will. And now, being old, he says that he has to bottle up, painfully, everything that comes to him, drop by drop. Is that what really happens? Have we all got to come to that? And, anyway, how do you reconcile that with *Saint Joan*?’

‘That’s an exception, of course. I said there *were* brilliant exceptions. But the average writer, like myself, finds that youth is the creative time, youth is the time

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

when ideas flock through one's mind so quickly that one can hardly catch them, and characters flock on the stage until they almost crowd each other out. Gradually that dies down. And then, by the time that you feel you really know how to write, that you have really mastered the technique of the thing – then you dry up. Dry up.'

Something in my expression must have given him pause. For it is not encouraging for a young writer, whose career still lies to a large extent before him, to be told that the time will come when he will 'dry up.' Though you may not believe it, one's first novel always seems to be one's last. And every idea that one seizes seems to be the last idea in a barren world. Therefore, with consummate tact – he has the tact of a diplomat of the *ancien régime* – he changed the subject. He said:

'But, of course, in the 'nineties, that melancholy state was still a long way off. In those days I was creating with an almost embarrassing speed. I had more invention than I could mould into form. My mind would run faster than my pen could follow. In those days I could write three novels in a year. Now I only write two in seven years. Yes, things were very different in the 'nineties.'

'But you aren't going to suggest, like Max Beer-bohm, that you "belong to the 'nineties"?"

'Not quite as bad as that, perhaps. But I belong to them quite as much as some of the people who have now become almost legends. You see, the legend of the 'nineties is all wrong. It is a legend that London was a wicked little village, with Wilde standing in the

centre, surrounded by attendant satellites, with a village bully who was called Whistler, and a village newspaper called the Yellow Book. That legend arose because all the people who have written about the 'nineties have been literary people. They have created the illusion that a very small set – the Yellow Book set – was the whole of London, whereas it was no more representative of all London than is any particular artistic set to-day.

'The big public – the great mass of average men and women – did not really bother very much about the Yellow Book set. They were reading and talking about other books – books by Conan Doyle, and Rider Haggard, and, if the truth must be told, by your humble servant.'

I knew that this was true, but it seemed to shatter an illusion which one retains in the face of obvious facts. Was there indeed about those days when Anthony Hope was a young man no feeling of delicate decay? Was there really no 'mist and melancholy,' giving to the *fin de siècle* the semblance of the close of an autumn day? I said to him, 'Wouldn't there be something different in the very air, supposing that you were driving down Piccadilly, on a spring evening, thirty years ago, in a hansom cab? . . .'

'Ah! A hansom cab!'

At the mention of that superb vehicle his eyes lit up, and for the first time since we had been talking one caught a tone of fervour in his voice.

'A hansom cab! Yes, that was a way of seeing London. To sit back, on one's way to dinner, with the

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

doors open, and a cigar in one's mouth, seeing everybody, being seen by everybody. . . . There was a certain gaiety about even the clicking of the horse's hoofs which one can't quite associate with the modern taxicab. It's a little difficult to realize, isn't it, that it was considered rather "daring" for any woman to drive in a hansom cab at first? Just as it was considered daring to . . .'

And then he talked, whimsically, brilliantly, setting the two ages side by side: the age when delicate fingers clutched at serge and satin to prevent those voluminous skirts from trailing in the ancient dust, comparing them with the age when skirts – well, you know all about that. He recalled the age when no woman was free to dine unchaperoned at a restaurant (unless she were 'free' in a rather wider sense than is associated with propriety). He evoked the times when manners were manners, when nobody combed their hair with their soup, nor powdered their nose with the fish; when a woman's great glory was her hair; when, in fact, *The Prisoner of Zenda* first came out; and he ended up by saying, 'There isn't the faintest real difference between young people then and now.'

And he calls himself a 'senile shade.'

## XXVII

ALDOUS HUXLEY

*or*

A Very Cold Young Man

QUANTITIES of Mr. Aldous Huxley reclined on my sofa, spreading over the cushions, and stretching long tentacles on to the floor. I had never before realized the curious fluidity of his frame. If seventy-five per cent of most human bodies is composed, as we are so often assured, of water, his must contain an even higher percentage.

And as his body so is his mind – cold, exceptionally fluid, wandering with equal facility into any channel of learning or experience. I had almost composed some vague simile about his throwing cold water over everything, but that would be unjust, implying a disdain of life. He *does* ‘throw cold water’ over people, institutions, emotions, and affairs, but not because he is disdainful, but because he has an exceptionally high standard by which to judge them.

‘As I grow older,’ he said, ‘I become more and more highbrow. It isn’t a pose. It’s the result of two months in London, and the agony of going to parties among people with a highly polished enthusiasm for art – or rather for artists. I think the modern passion for artists is morbid and disgusting. A bad artist, or a writer of atrocious verse, is considered infinitely more important

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

than a first-rate barrister or a brilliant engineer. One goes to a party, and, apart from receiving extravagant and nauseating compliments oneself, one hears the word "divine" applied indiscriminately to ballets, operas, actresses, novelists, free verse—to anything that can possibly be labelled artistic. And if a young man can tell some gossip story about Picasso, or express an opinion on Matisse, he is immediately regarded as intelligent. Of course, I'm only talking about a certain set of people, but it's a pretty large set. The whole thing revolts me because it's soft, and softness is the end of everything.'

That seemed to me a very significant outburst. Most people—I am saying this with no suggestion that 'most people' are right—do not particularly mind the sort of party which he meant. They pay no attention to the sham enthusiasms, listen unconcerned to the highly coloured adjectives which flutter from highly coloured lips, and eat their food and possibly talk a little nonsense too. One has done it oneself. But Huxley is incapable even of pretending to like it. If the thing is petty and footling and futile, it is wrong and revolting. He feels sick and leaves the room.

'Softness is the end of everything.' That is the keynote of his philosophy. If he has any sentimentality he conceals it from the world. And did he find a small spot of it lurking unsuspected in his disposition, he would feel unclean. He is a curiously self-revealing writer, and I feel that no passage in his works throws so vivid a light on his temperament as his essay on Ben Jonson. One need make no excuse for a quotation of it;

'A little ruthless laughter clears the air as nothing else can do; it is good for us, every now and then, to see our ideals laughed at, our conception of nobility caricatured; it is good for solemnity's nose to be tweaked, for human pomposity to be made to look mean and ridiculous. A good dose of this mockery, administered twice a year at the equinoxes, should purge our minds of much waste matter, make nimble our spirits, and brighten the eye to look more clearly and truthfully on the world about us.'

He does look clearly, but whether he looks truthfully or not is a question which one can only decide according to one's own temperament. For myself, I feel that anyone so completely devoid of sentimentality must of necessity be a little biased. He gives one a sense, in his writings, of a little group of intelligentsia clinging unhappily together in a grossly hostile world. Not merely unsympathetic, or lacking in understanding, but grossly, actively hostile.

And when the majority, or at any rate the *ruling* majority, are so hostile, what cause is there for enthusiasm? In fact, enthusiasm, in the ordinary sense of the word, implying perspiration and extravagance and folly, is alien to him. You may remember that when Hobbes wrote his *Great Leviathan* the word 'enthusiasm' was almost a term of reproach. It had a meaning akin to the modern 'fanaticism.' I do not know if enthusiastic persons were necessarily of the criminal classes, but they certainly came near to it. And Huxley gives me the impression that for him the majority of our enthusiasms are fatuous and fanatical. They



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

probably are, but thank the Lord we can occasionally forget it.

That is why he gives the impression of taking his pleasures sadly. He will eat a bowl of salted almonds with appetite and grace—even a melancholy relish—but he would always know when he had had enough; and the man who knows when he has had enough salted almonds is not as most men. In fact, I am inclined to think that the people who know when they have had enough of anything are the only really immoral people in the world. He will be stirred by the gay pomp and circumstance in the streets of Florence when they are celebrating a Dante centenary, but I doubt if he would join in the shouting, even though he speaks excellent Italian.

Strangely enough, the pastime which seems to bring the brightest light to his eye is motoring. He lives at the top of a very high hill in Italy, so that even in the coldest weather, one has only to put the car in gear, run it for a hundred yards, and find it warm and purring without any winding of handles or flooding of carburettors. And once the car has started, something in him starts also. After all, there is nothing in the least sentimental or soft about speed. It is pure sensation, perhaps the purest sensation which man is capable of receiving. It evokes in the mind feelings of domination, of terror, of superiority, but it does not bring the tear to the eye or the pang to the heart. It is therefore a very suitable pastime for Aldous Huxley.

All of which sounds carping and unduly critical, as though I did not appreciate his learning, his irony, the

chastity of his style and the occasional riotous unchastity of his conceptions. Perhaps he has infected me with his own qualities. For I always feel that he must write with a sharp fountain-pen, filled with ink that has first been clarified and then frozen. And so the figures he creates have everything but charm. They are witty, or grotesque, or beautiful; they are ingenious, brilliant, dangerous; but they are never 'nice.' Even if they are virtuous they are unsympathetic. They are the last sort of people whom one would ever wish to visit one in a sick-room. In fact, I think it is true to say that if Charles Dickens was incapable of giving a man the qualities of a gentleman, Aldous Huxley is incapable of giving him charm.

## XXVIII

MARGARET KENNEDY

or

A Certain Wildness

‘JOSEPH II of Austria, Catherine of Russia, Charles III of Spain and his Minister Aranda, the Portuguese Minister Pombal, Gustavus III of Sweden, Leopold of Tuscany, Ferdinand of Naples and his Minister Tanucci, the Duke of Parma and his Minister Du Tillot, Bernstorff the Danish Minister, the King of Sardinia, the Elector of Bavaria, and a legion of German princelings, all appeared to be tireless in their efforts to do good. Improvement of some sort was attempted almost everywhere in Europe. *And even the Pope was reported to have drained some marshes.*’

The intelligent reader who discovered this italicized phrase (and others of the same genre) in the middle of a sober history intended for the consumption of sixth-form students would probably turn back to the title-page to discover the author of so agreeable a cynicism. But when he read, ‘By Margaret Kennedy, B.A. Oxon, with eight maps,’ the name would probably convey but little to him. He would certainly not connect this earnest, but faintly acidulous, historian with the author of *The Constant Nymph*.

It remains for me to inform the world that the two ladies (with or without maps) are identical. The world

will, it is hoped, be surprised, for even Miss Kennedy herself (although the book was published only four years ago, just after she had left Oxford) has almost forgotten it. She will say to you, 'Before I wrote *The Constant Nymph* there was a book called *The Ladies of Lyndon*, which sold about 10,000 copies.' Pause. And then, *sotto voce*: 'Oh, by the way, before that, I published a history of Europe.'

I learnt a lot about Miss Kennedy from this unpretentious volume, and even more when she informed me of the remarkable vicissitudes which accompanied its production. The gentle author desired that it should be called *From Jacobin to Bolshevik*. There was a certain flourish about the phrase which appealed to her. Besides, it happened to describe the book itself – a book which brings to mind the vision of a cultured young woman, with skirts lifted high and nose faintly tilted, using the heads of the great as stepping-stones across the marshy ground of 1789–1922.

But so flamboyant a title was not to the taste of the publishers. They saw teachers looking askance at the word 'Bolshevik.' They therefore suggested to her that it should be called *A Century of Progress*. However, the recorder of Sanger's Circus had very definite ideas as to the meaning of the word 'progress.' She vetoed the proposed title, and compromised with *A Century of Revolution*, which was accurate, if undistinguished. This title was at length accepted.

Thereupon the text itself was subjected to certain frank criticisms. It was discovered that Miss Kennedy had not cast a sufficiently hostile eye upon Karl Marx,

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

nor had she curtsied with any noticeable reverence before the figure of Mazzini. Could these little errors in taste be rectified? Always ready to oblige, the author added a few deft touches to her portrait of Marx, noting that 'The Marxist School retained all the rigid dogmatism so congenial to the Teutonic mind.' But it is a little difficult to see what she has done about Mazzini — that glorified wind-bag. It seems that she has only made him dull.

The history was now almost complete. The relations between the author and her publishers (one of the most courteous and admirable firms in London) left nothing to be desired. They wrote to her that the book was eminently readable, and contained much matter usually ignored. And then, at the end of the letter, came the singular comment: 'Our reader reports that your style is careless, slipshod, and inelegant.' Could anything be done to change this style?

Miss Kennedy replied that she regretted that her style could not be changed. Might she, however, suggest that the publisher should change his reader?

Silence. A short quiescence. Once again the publisher wrote suggesting that perhaps Miss Kennedy might show her manuscript to some friend to obtain an independent opinion? Miss Kennedy replied that the only friend to whom she had shown the manuscript was the Master of Balliol, and he had approved of it.

And so this 'careless, slipshod and inelegant' work was published. It earns for its author every year about as much as *The Constant Nymph* earns every thirty

seconds. And its last sentence is so startlingly unexpected by its decorous orthodoxy that it should really be quoted: 'Only by concentrated and dispassionate study, by clear thought, and by determined self-sacrifice on the part of every individual in our great democracy can we justify ourselves in that path of honour to which we have been called.'

I can imagine our author heaving a sigh of relief after the composition of that sonorous sentence, and reaching out for a clean sheet of paper on which to trace the first outlines of the enamelled figure of Trigorin.

I have dealt at such unwarranted length with this almost unknown work because, apart from its value as a literary curiosity, it does help to indicate that Miss Kennedy has a very solid background. Anybody who reads *The Constant Nymph*, with its unforgettable gallery of highly irritating, electric, ultra-Bohemian individuals, might imagine that the author is herself cast in the same mould. They might think that she was brought up by the oddest relations, and lived exclusively on sops and pimentos, and had straws in her hair. The great British public will be relieved to hear that she is not at all like that. She dresses with the utmost severity. Her conversation is sober and restrained, with flashes of the same agreeable acidity which we have observed in *A Century of Revolution*. And she is human enough to be (after myself) one of the best bus-catchers in the kingdom.

But if there are no straws in her hair, there are straws in her mind. Oh, there is a wildness there: a galloping, untutored spirit. I once asked her if she had ever met

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

any people like those whom she describes in *The Constant Nymph*. No, she said; but she made it quite clear that she would like to have met them. They were her kindred spirits, these nervous, uncouth, vibrating creatures, so utterly careless of the normal standards of conduct, so painfully scrupulous in all which concerns their art.

It was when she was telling me the plot of *The Ladies of Lyndon* that I realized this kinship with her creatures. Very briefly, it is the story of a boy whose relations decide that he is mad. When he grows up, the eccentricities which they had regarded as madness prove him a genius.

He becomes a great painter, and, relenting, they commission him to execute a decorative frieze. He accepts the commission, and paints perfect likenesses of his aunts, uncles, and cousins in a state of complete nudity.

As she narrated this singular fancy, her eyes sparkled, as though in hatred of the relations and in championship of the boy. He was almost a hero to her. One knew that she wished there were more of his type in the world. Some of us would be inclined to share her wish.

## XXIX

### KOMISARJEVSKY

or

Behind the Scenes

THE scene is a large room on the third floor of a building in Rupert Street, which runs into Shaftesbury Avenue. It is a particularly ugly room, uncarpeted, uncurtained with walls of salmon-pink, and a cracked ceiling from which the paper is peeling mournfully.

In the centre of the room, seated on a wooden form, a woman weeps. She has been weeping, on and off, for nearly three-quarters of an hour, and one would have thought that by this time her tears would have run dry. But no; they are beginning all over again. For a certain figure, clad in a grey suit, is leaning on the edge of a piano, watching intently, commanding sorrow. And whenever sorrow shows signs of flagging, he commands it again.

The figure in grey is Komisarjevsky; the play is Act III of Tchekhov's *Cherry Orchard*; the weeping woman is, of course, Lyubov Andreyevna. Needless to say, there is a good deal of sorrow to be commanded in this act, and, without the aid of scenery, or make-up, or lighting, one might well imagine that it would become monotonous. But no. After endless repetitions one begins to see his idea. He is softening one figure,



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

smoothing her character, as a sculptor smooths a piece of clay. He is hardening another, making him louder, more aggressive. He is quickening the action of one little group, retarding the movement of another. And when we reached that amazing climax to Act III where the dancing outside the door heightens the gloom-charged atmosphere within, I realized that he was not so much producing as *conducting*. The musical analogy was perfect. And as this idea seemed to express a new and intriguing theory of dramatic æsthetics, I asked him later, over some excellent Bortsch (with cream, one shilling extra) if he felt the analogy himself.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Look at it in this way. A play is like a symphony. Its acts fall under the heading of, let us say, *allegro*, *andante*, *presto* — according to the sequence of emotions which the story unfolds. And just as the conductor of an orchestra must grasp the entire symphony before he begins to rehearse any single movement, so a producer must visualize the whole play before he begins to produce any single act.

‘What happens then? Speaking for myself, at any rate, I begin to hear each actor as a series of *notes*. And together, the actors form a fugue, running concurrently or in opposition, in harmony or discord — a fugue which I never allow myself to lose. One might say, for instance, that the main melody was played by the heroine, that the second part was played by her lover, and that the minor parts formed the bass. And, to my mind, the producer should *play* those parts, giving their proper significance, as clearly as a conductor stresses a passage for his first violins, or mutes an accompaniment of ‘cellos,’

If you read the above paragraph carefully, taking a deep breath after each comma, it may become a little less obscure than *Sordello*. And if you take the opportunity of seeing the present Tchekhov season at Barnes, it should become entirely plain.

Now for the pictorial side of his theories, which, after the Bortsch, he proceeded to explain. Let us reduce them to their simplest terms. They are, to me at least, extremely stimulating.

Imagine an almost empty stage, with half a dozen figures silhouetted against a neutral background, which is relieved by a single tree. Imagine, again, a single act of a play, dividing itself, in the space of forty minutes, into three main emotional divisions, which, for the sake of contrast, we may call joy, love, and despair.

During the 'joy' movement, apart altogether from the briskness with which the figures move, the quality and content of their speech, the *significance* of joy will be expressed by their grouping, not as individuals, but as a whole. It can really best be expressed by the jargon of the Futurists. Certain lines, merely by their abstract form, their relationship to one another, express exhilaration, others express dejection, etc.

Thus, with this particular scene, if you put it in the crudest possible way, you will have a black figure drooping on the sofa, shadows curling darkly and listlessly beneath the tree, and all the movement of all the characters subdued to a series of curves which *in themselves* are calculated to express sorrow, apart from the lines they may be saying or the way in which they may be saying them.

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

The English people cannot bear more than two minutes of any theory, so I will not say more. But perhaps, from these few words, some people may begin to realize that the producer is, to say the least of it, more important than they had imagined.

Komisarjevsky told me that in Russia the producer was all-important. You could see fifty productions of the same Tchekov play, and they would all be entirely different – as different as a Chopin étude played by Cortot and Orloff. ‘It keeps the plays *alive*,’ he cried. ‘It would even keep Shakespeare alive, if he were produced properly. Look at *Hamlet*! Nobody here seems to realize that *Hamlet* is a *play*. They’ve all forgotten the story because they are so hypnotized by the personality of the actor who is playing Hamlet. But the story is there – a wonderful story. The producer could make that story come to life. Why doesn’t somebody try?’

‘But then’ – and he put his head on one side with that curious little sly gesture which is so characteristic of him – ‘the English people don’t want to see life. They hate it. It either bores them or shocks them – I don’t know which. There isn’t a single English character – uniquely English, I mean – being shown on the London stage to-day.

‘Yes’ – he leant forward and pointed through the window to the surging pavements – ‘out there are walking the most extraordinary characters which you will find in any part of the world.’ And he told me of some of the people whom he had seen during his last Sunday afternoon’s promenade – an old woman standing in an alley, gravely letting down her skirt to her knees in

K O M I S A R J E V S K Y

order to adjust a recalcitrant corset; an old man at the corner of a deserted street, preaching passionately to thin air. . . . 'What are all your dramatists doing,' he asked with Russian fervour, 'to pass all these people by?'

Sean O'Casey made exactly the same complaint to me in Irish as Komisarjevsky made in Russian. There must be something in what they say. I think I shall go and sell matches in the Adelphi, where all the dramatists live. Perhaps Shaw or Barrie might buy a box, and be struck by the English cast of my features. Perhaps, again, they might not. But somebody ought to have a shot at it.

## XXX

FATHER RONALD KNOX

*or*

Every Other Inch a Saint

I WAS, to a certain extent, 'brought up on' Father Ronald Knox. He was always cropping up in the circles where I moved. His words used to be quoted, as a sort of shattering ultimatum, by earnest youths at school who had been driven by compulsory chapel to a form of religion far removed from our hearty hymn-singing.

At Balliol, of course, he was legendary. Little tired epigrams of his fashioning would flicker, like ghosts, through our post-war conversation. His slender works continued to adorn the most advanced bookshelves. And even one's tutor would occasionally, with a sort of awe, repeat that historic limerick, composed outside the Balliol common-room, in which he summed up the whole philosophy of Hegel:

There was a young man who said, 'God  
Must think it exceedingly odd,  
If He finds that this tree  
Continues to be  
When there's no one about in the quad.'

However, he has ceased to belong entirely to Oxford. He has come out into the open, with startling effect.

And since my purpose is to give you a better idea of the man behind these pyrotechnic displays, I shall follow the suggestion of an amiable critic who has just informed the world that my literary style is like a cinematograph working at top speed. I shall show you a close-up of a pale and strangely youthful face, rather dark about the eyes, twisted into an expression of such moving disgust that one feels Hollywood has lost a star, even if the Church has gained a saint.

The close-up broadens out, and we see that Father Knox is tossing in his narrow bed, unable to sleep. The reason for his discomfort is immediately apparent. On a table near by is a volume of Tennyson's poems. It is open at 'Maud,' and the camera, with a sudden swoop, leaves the bed and its occupant, and flickers over the lines:

Shine out, little head, brimming over with curls,  
To the flowers, and be their sun . . .

I have reproduced this winsome little couplet, which has brought so much sunshine to so many English drawing-rooms, because Father Knox once informed me, between clenched teeth, that he thought it the 'filthiest' in English literature. The remark seemed to me more to illuminate Knox than Tennyson. (Though, of course, it is a filthy couplet.) For Knox is important, not so much as the *enfant terrible* of the Roman Catholic Church, nor as the depressingly brilliant scholar of Balliol (*vide Who's Who*), but as one of the most earnest anti-slosh campaigners of our age.

One has only to study his face when he is talking of

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

Tennyson to see that he really *does* hate him – not with any polite and conventional dislike, but with an almost religious fervour. ‘He sends me to bed in a ghastly wicked temper,’ he confessed to me. ‘I shudder at the frightful self-consciousness of his effects. His whole cold-blooded mentality is absolutely repulsive to me. And I’ve never been so pleased by any parody as by an unpublished couplet of Raymond Asquith’s, which seems to sum up the whole of Tennyson in two lines:

And I shall meet Him face to face,  
As gentleman to gentleman.’

You see the idea? And it does not apply only to Tennyson. It applies also to a great many amiable ladies and gentlemen who are at present walking happily and unsuspectingly along their respective thoroughfares. I can picture Ronald Knox dogging their footsteps, stooping slightly, his under-lip thrust out in contempt against their flabbiness. A couple of priests jostle his elbow, and as they pass he hears scraps of religious journalese which make him snort with disgust. They are arguing about something, and he hears one of them say to the other, ‘Life is larger than logic.’ A look of anguish passes over Knox’s face. How can life be larger than logic, except in a comic song or a leading article? He pauses, wondering if he shall pursue the two offenders and drag them back to a conflict.

He wanders farther down the street, and he sees a woman in a masculine frock, with thick shoes, an eye-glass, and an Eton crop. She is powdering her nose. Again the lower lip protrudes, and it is with difficulty

that he persuades himself not to remonstrate. For she, again, is being illogical. 'Powder your face as thick as Pagliacci,' he might say to her. 'Wear trousers if you like. *But*, don't do both together. Be either a man or a woman. Be, at all costs, logical. Anything else is a sign of slosh.'

Naturally, since there is so much slosh in the world, he is constantly finding himself forced to protest. As though he were an eighteenth-century lampooner, his hand is always fumbling in his breast-pocket for a scrap of paper on which to scribble the diatribe of the moment. For instance, one cold and frosty morning he is walking along the station platform of a great cathedral city. He pauses, looks out into the distance, and sees the grim and barren walls of the houses which surround the cathedral. He shivers, gropes for his pencil, and writes:

These are the backs of all the canons' houses,  
 These are the walks of all the canons' wives.  
 Here the precentor innocently browses:  
 God! What a set of ineffective lives!

Now, that is not the outburst of a young Catholic priest against his idea of conventional Protestantism. It has nothing to do with any branch of religion. It is purely temperamental – the expression, not of the Church militant, but of the man militant. It is the same sort of feeling which makes him, when he has entered his train, sit back and scribble the following lines in parody of certain verses out of a very precious literary review which lies by his side. I should explain,



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

*en passant*, that they are inspired by the floods, which he has observed outside the window:

There are no floods on Killiecrankie Pass,  
The waters are not standing in Glencoe.  
His ermine cope of seasonable snow  
Muffles the patient shoulders of Strathglass.

The floods are out in Bedfordshire, they say.  
In Bedfordshire . . . a devastating thought.  
Heap high the logs, then! – I suppose one *ought*  
To wish the floods in Bedfordshire away.

He copied those lines on to my blotting-pad one morning as a proof that anybody with a little intelligence could write the sort of stuff which was published in that very eminent journal, but perhaps I had better not mention its name. Slosh, again, you see. Slosh everywhere. A devastating thought indeed.

But I do not wish you to regard him as a sort of gloomy creature, perpetually scowling at a degenerate world. He is nothing of the sort. He can bubble with excitement and enthusiasm about the oddest things. Provided, always, that he is allowed to be free. A priest, he insists, should be able to do anything that anybody else can do, so long as it does not interfere with his other duties. If he wishes, he can even be allowed to frighten the people of England into fits by announcing on the wireless that a revolution had broken out in Trafalgar Square. That historic question, however, I have no time to discuss. I can only record my opinion that it probably did the people of England a power of good.

## XXXI

### LASZLO

*or*

#### Two Sorts of Success

‘**Y**ou see, there is no need for an artist to be slow. Of all the things which Laszlo had been saying that struck me the most vividly. I can still see him as he said it. He was standing in front of a picture which he had painted of his two sons when they were children. The little group was perfectly placed on the canvas, the brushwork was light and firm, the colouring clean and sweet. The whole thing had the gay poise and challenge of an inspiration – as, indeed, it was, for it was completed in only a few hours.

‘There is no need for an artist to be slow.’ One should realize what that means. It means, first of all, a mastery of technique so absolute that he entirely forgets that technique exists. In the other event there is a painful sketch. Then a sort of map is traced on the canvas. There is a painting in, a painting out, a scramble, a flurry, a wild agonized flight after the twin spirits of colour and design, in which too often the spirits escape.

Laszlo’s method is different. Generally he first draws a sketch to decide pose, light, colour-scheme, silhouette. Then he draws with his brush straight on to the canvas, with a swift sweep, not even glancing at the palette which he holds in his diminutive left hand. He

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

makes no 'maps.' He said to me: 'If I were first to draw my design and then to paint I should be a slave to my design. I should no longer be a slave to Nature. I should say — my pretty design, I must not spoil it! But, you see, I have learned to draw, until I no longer need to think about drawing. For only when you are so free of technical considerations that you do not have to think of them can you really express the deeper things of the spirit.'

Well, is not that true? Our little world is overrun by so-called art-critics who make it their business to find out how a man works, and condemn him in advance if he works easily. I met a critic once who had just discovered that one of Lord Birkenhead's articles had been dictated in twenty minutes before breakfast. The article, in his opinion, was *ipso facto* a bad article. I met another critic who railed against *The Vortex* because it was written in a few days. And there are many fools who regard Laszlo's amazing facility as in some strange way a proof of superficiality.

I am perfectly aware that there are many things which he has done which are unworthy of him, many chocolate-box effusions, many pictures which are as boring as the social celebrities they portray. But that is no excuse for regarding Laszlo as a man who has never done anything worth while.

After all, he was not born with a technique; he had to master it when he was a young man. 'When I began painting,' he said to me, 'I used to strive after a likeness. One cannot do fine work when one is always thinking of that. I believe in absolute *prima* painting,

like Franz Hals and Velasquez. By and by I mastered that difficulty. I could, in fact, paint what I *saw*. And now, when the actual painting is so easy to me – so easy – I strive to see more and more deeply. After all, the likeness is nothing. One might say that a face is only a mask. I try to see behind the mask. *That* is the big thing. As a result, every picture I paint is an agony to me. It is not an agony while it is being painted, but after it is finished, because I ask myself – Have I seen enough? Have I seen aright? The painting – that I can do without thought. It is the striving after a vision that is so exhausting.’

I do not think there are many honest men who will deny that sometimes he has caught that vision. A certain picture is in my mind as I write these words. He painted it during those dark days of the war, when a little group of loud-voiced ‘patriots’ were making themselves publicly and permanently ridiculous by accusing him of – well, I really forget what accusation they did find. But every country, in those days, contained groups of half-wits who were attacked by a form of epilepsy at the mere mention of anybody with a drop of alien blood in his veins.

These charming people drove Laszlo, tired and sick at heart, to his house in the country, where he remained a prisoner till he obtained his public rehabilitation. And it was there that he was visited by the great comforter – inspiration. This picture, which I have just mentioned, shows the corner of a room, with the sunlight streaming through the windows, and the figure of a woman (his wife) standing in profile, a violin held

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

loosely in her hand. She had been playing, and had paused to look out on to the quiet garden. Laszlo glanced up at her, and saw — a picture. In three sittings that picture was completed. Yet, in spite of its swift creation, the whole lore and learning of painting lies in the strip of sunlight which floods the room, just as a lifetime of work may echo in the darting flight of a cadenza when Kreisler plays it. One sees the texture of sunlight on wood, on various cloths, on flowers, infinitely delicate, but as simple as sunlight itself. If I were a painter I should not be able to look at those few inches of light without emotion.

It is not unnatural that a man with such a mastery should feel violently impatient with the ultra-moderns. We talked about them. I found myself disagreeing with him, because I am able to find in their coarse and broken rhythms a certain pattern which is truly significant of this age. But his point of view is comprehensible. 'They don't know their *métier*,' he said. 'They simply don't know what one can do with a brush and what one can't. The French Impressionists began the debacle. They brought light and colour and joy to landscapes which had been lying in *shadow* for many years, too neglectful of truth and Nature's atmosphere. The people who came after Manet and Monet and Degas and Renoir haven't followed them up. They merely saw that a certain style of painting appeared to be very easy and very popular. And so they painted in that style, more and more wildly, more and more childishly, *before they had even learned to draw.*'

Well, that is a debatable question, into which one

cannot enter in so short a space. In any case, it does not affect Laszlo's own achievements. Life must be very wonderful to him. At any moment, while the pageant is still passing, while the wine has still its sparkle, before the shadows have begun to fall, he can capture the beauty and personality which comes his way. He showed me a little sketch of Pompeii – some hills, some trees, some clouds. This sketch was painted outside the walls of Pompeii in one hour, Laszlo having just missed his train. That is always happening to him. He sees a glitter of sunshine on the green horses of St. Mark's, and he can't resist painting a study of it; and presently the aforesaid glitter is being registered on his canvas. He finds himself in the desert towards dusk; and, swiftly though the light fades, it cannot fade too swiftly for his fingers. Indeed, were I in search of a man to paint a flash of lightning, I believe I should know where to find him – which is about the best epitaph he could have.

## XXXII

### SIR JOHN LAVERY

*or*

The Importance of being an Orphan

IN Glasgow is a park beloved of the birds. It has green trees where they sing, and a fountain where they wash the dust from their wings. And people walk by, morning, noon, and night, scattering crumbs and crusts on the grass.

Had you chanced to be wandering down one of those bird-haunted walks some evening fifty-five years ago, you might have noticed a slight shabby figure gliding in the shadows. The behaviour of the figure is singular. Instead of throwing bread to the birds he is picking it up! First a piece of crust, then a piece of crumb, quickly, furtively. And when the bread has been secured, the figure takes it over to the fountain and dips it in the water, for if one has to eat bread for one's dinner one might as well eat it clean. Yet, I can well believe that in those days there must have been many times when John Lavery was so hungry that he forgot all about the fountain, and crammed the bread, dust and all, into his mouth, to the indignation of many a plump starling.

I have introduced him in this manner because I am a little tired of the fashionable portrait painter legend. You know what I mean – lovely women staring from the canvases – green and gold and red – spacious in-

teriors – stately homes of New England – pockets full of cheques – it is all a little inhuman. I like to remember the beginnings. And I particularly like to remember that Sir John Lavery is one of the few famous artists who learnt their first lesson in a photographer's studio, touching up negatives.

It happened like this. He was about eighteen. He was an orphan in Glasgow. Up till now his life had been nothing but a series of 'runnings away.' He had run away from Ireland because they wanted to make him a priest. After that he had run away from so many places and so many people, always with such good excuses, that I cannot begin to tell about them. And in any case it is all written down, much better than I can write it, in a book called *Oliver Twist*.

Then, one summer evening – an evening when people had not been very kind to the birds in the park – he wandered into an art gallery and saw the first oil painting he had ever seen in his life. It was called 'The Death of Chatterton,' and it had the effect upon Lavery of making him forget all about the trials of an orphan and the unsatisfactory lot of a billiard-marker – (for billiard-marker he then was). And though I myself think 'The Death of Chatterton' a dull picture, I can imagine the effect that it must have had on the young Lavery, if only because of the painful resemblance between Chatterton's early life and his own.

Well, that same evening, there appeared in a Glasgow evening newspaper an advertisement:



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

Next day, the small, determined figure appeared on the doorstep of the advertiser and said he was the artist for whom they had been seeking. And, indeed, he was. For the advertiser was in the photography business, and he needed somebody to touch up his plates. Lavery touched them up for him. I do not know if in those days the spirit of the devil entered into him, giving him some magic power of eliminating wrinkles and coaxing away superfluous chins, but I do know that he touched up so prettily and so delicately that people came from far and wide to be photographed at the shop where he worked. So that after a while, the starlings in the park no longer complained of unfair human competition in the matter of bread.

Let us turn from this harrowing picture and discover him as he is to-day – established, urbane, of an invariable tranquillity. Why is he still painting as finely as ever? Because, as he says himself, ‘I paint what I see.’ Now, that is really a very revolutionary remark. For, raging in our midst are dozens of artists who would be ashamed to admit that they painted what they saw. Oh, no, ladies and gentlemen, they paint what they feel. Though a woman may have eyes as blank as gooseberries, they happen to be aware, by a careful study of *Who’s Who*, that she has disposed of three husbands and just acquired a fourth, and if a woman does not get a far-away look in the eyes after all that, she is no lady. So they give her a far-away look in the eyes. (The recipe, I believe, is to mix a little white of egg with the paint.)

Lavery, however, would do nothing of the sort. He

is superficial in the best possible meaning of the word. He judges by the surfaces which are before him. His reaction is purely æsthetic, and it is always instantaneous. He sees a face and he – well, I can only repeat the apparently simple, but really complex formula – he paints it as he sees it. Then, if there is anything in that face, it will come out. If the face has anything to give, it will give it, even though Lavery himself may not see it. He put it to me like this: ‘Supposing you are talking to two women who are sitting on the same sofa. You are in love with one of them. You do not notice the other one at all. She does not exist for you, not in your mind, at least, even though she may have far more beauty and spirit in her face than the one you love. Yet, if you painted her, and painted what you *saw*, you would bring out her beauty and her spirit, even if at the moment you didn’t notice it yourself, because you were blinded by the other woman. Then, say, a year later, you might fall out of love again. And you’d come back to your picture of the other woman and see for the first time that you’d expressed something beautiful and fine – in spite of yourself.

‘You have to have a shock – a sort of quick reaction to beauty,’ he went on. ‘People have sometimes thought that it is easy for me to paint my wife, merely because I know her features so well. It is precisely for that reason that she is the most difficult woman in the world for me to paint. My mind is full of *her* mind. All sorts of forces, conscious and unconscious, are tugging at my hand to make me express something which I’m not actually seeing. . . .

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

'Sargent put it best, really. Sargent and I were the same age. We were brought up in the same sort of traditions. I was talking to him once at the old Art Club in Hanover Square, with another artist, and we both said to him: "If we had your technique and your devilish skill we'd paint differently" – meaning, I suppose, that we should give a freer rein to our fancy, jump off at the deep end, as it were. And Sargent replied, "When I'm able to paint what I see, then it'll be time enough to talk about painting differently." Afterwards, of course, we learnt that Sargent was right, and we became, as it were, pupils again. I've gone on being a pupil ever since.

'Sargent used to tell me that if there wasn't a button on the coat of his sitter, he wouldn't paint it. I don't think he was exaggerating. He certainly used to scour London for a certain sort of table if he wanted to paint that table. He didn't evolve tables out of his head. Nor do I. Have a cigarette?'

I end in that manner because this essay has contained absolutely no little gossipy snippets, and I feel it incumbent upon me to state that the cigarette he offered me was the longest and fattest I have ever seen, and was still alight, half an hour afterwards, when I had begun to write the opening paragraph about the birds. Which is really the part I like the best.

## XXXIII

SUZANNE LENGLEN

*or*

Much Ado about Nothing

THERE are at least three Suzanne Lenglens. The first is Suzanne playing tennis, whom I worship. The second is Suzanne having played tennis, whom I frequently detest. The third is Suzanne neither playing, having played, nor about to play tennis, who moves me not at all.

Let us deal with these three women in turn.

I know nothing whatever about tennis, and I am therefore able to judge Suzanne's game from the only possible standard in which a woman's game should be judged, the æsthetic. Her game is æsthetically perfect. It arouses in me emotions curiously similar to those aroused by Pavlova. The delicacy of her rhythm, the swift poise and flutter, the twinkling feet that seem hardly to touch the ground, the curving, sinuous, lithe body, the boyish grace of her repose – all these are a keen delight which will remain long after her eccentricities are forgotten.

Most women (though they will loathe me for telling them so) look positively hideous when playing tennis. Their faces become purple, their hair becomes untidy, and they either ape the man or call forth the most ungainly qualities of the woman. Suzanne, on the other

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

hand, becomes a dancing nymph. She is etherealized. One forgets even the irregular cast of her features. One forgets even the irregular cast of her temper. One is merely magnetized by a melting, swaying, tiptoe vision in white that seems to be blown across the court, here, there, and everywhere, like the petal of a white daisy in a summer wind. I care not whether she is playing with a tennis ball, or whether she is merely chasing butterflies. The result is beauty, and that is enough for me.

The second Suzanne is the Suzanne who has just played tennis. This particular Suzanne seems to me, as often as not, a very regrettable person. I shall probably be told that I should not say this because: (a) she is a woman; (b) she is French; (c) she has a temperament.

Let me explain. It seems to me very – I think I will stick to it – ‘regrettable,’ that after her classic match with Miss Wills, Suzanne should have protested quite so loudly about her private griefs, her sleepless nights, her unfitness for playing, her this, that, and the other. Why can’t she play a game, and play it without all this hullabaloo? For all she knew, Miss Wills might have played through the set having just been informed of the death of a rich uncle who had left his money to a dogs’ home. Miss Wills might not have slept for weeks. Miss Wills might have had the evil eye cast upon her just before her first serve. But Miss Wills did not ‘tell the world.’ For all of which, I take off my hat to Miss Wills, and the American spirit of sport.

It is all very good copy, of course, this Suzanne

temperament. She is like a *prima donna* who has to be coaxed before she will consent to appear, and who announces, before her appearance, that she is really suffering from a dreadful sore throat and ought not to appear at all. But I don't think that it really endears Suzanne to the public – not, at least, to the British public.

I shall never forget a striking illustration I once had of the truth of what I have just written. It was three years ago, at Wimbledon. I cannot give you the names, but Suzanne and Miss Ryan were playing against two fluffy-haired maidens who, Suzanne imagined, would fail to gain a single point. They not only gained points, but games. And when the score reached 4 – 2 (in Suzanne's favour, of course), Suzanne suddenly marched to the side of the court, threw down her racquet, and appealed to the umpire (or to somebody by him) to extract a fly from her eye. The crowd groaned ironically. They distrusted the flies that flew into Suzanne's eyes. They had heard too much of that particular sort of fly. In fact, they presumed that she was shamming. A groundless presumption, of course, but it shows the trend of popular feeling. And I do not blame the crowd in the least.

The third Suzanne. The Suzanne who is not playing tennis is, I fear, not so thrilling. I only once had the privilege of meeting her. It was a year or two ago, and we sat together in the lounge of a very hot hotel, talking about tennis. I had been informed that she was 'a mass of nerves' and that I must therefore coo and speak in a soft voice.

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

She was anything but a mass of nerves. I have never met any woman who was more completely self-confident. She lay back in her arm-chair, in a rather stiff white frock, one hand raised to her head, the other fluttering at random in the air to emphasize the points of her conversation. She spoke English extraordinarily well, though with a slightly nasal accent, which made me wonder if she had learnt the language from an American.

The point, however, which most interested me was that she had no sort of doubt that everything she said was completely and absolutely right, always had been right, and always would be right. Well, she is perfectly justified in thinking so. Judging by results, her method must be perfect. But when I suggested to her that there might be other methods which would suit other women, instead of discussing the point, she merely looked at me with a sort of pity, as though I was a harmless lunatic (which, in the matter of tennis, I am), and did not even bother to respond.

And so you see, I prefer to think of her playing tennis, and, more than all, to think of her from a purely æsthetic point of view. One day, perhaps, a great composer will create a Suzanne ballet. And then this troubled, brilliant, tempestuous woman will be seen as God intended her to be seen – as a dancer pure and simple.

## XXXIV

LLOYD GEORGE

*or*

The World's Spell-binder

THURSDAY, *March* 24. Breakfasted with Lloyd George. That seems to me quite a bright beginning for a day. But, indeed, the actual beginning was rather dreary, for I had to call for a Liberal Member of Parliament at the Reform Club, and he was still in his bath. And to sit with an empty stomach under a bust of Gladstone at nine o'clock in the morning is enough to turn the warmest Liberal into a crusted Tory.

However, at last we were knocking at the bright green door in Cheyne Row, and a minute later we entered the dining-room, where we began the proceedings by presenting a cigarette-card to Lloyd George, bearing a curiously hideous image of him. The whole scene remains very vividly in my mind, and I must try to fix the colours before they fade. There was an almond tree foaming pink outside the window. A white cloth, and some tulips. There was the black figure of Dame Margaret, radiating kindliness. And a large golden orange. Above the orange looked the head of the ex-dictator of Europe: very bright eyes, a pink complexion, white hair that looked as though it were shampooed twice a day.

I am too hungry to do much hero-worshipping at



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

first. But after coffee and a sole, I begin to be slightly intoxicated. What is happening? Ah, the Welsh wizard is at work! I had read much of his bewildering charm, but I had never realized that it could act on so short an acquaintance at so unpromising an hour. Yet here I am, already completely under the spell. I decline a boiled egg.

I am leaving out dozens of impressions; but I want to arrive at the moment when he was describing his emotions on making a speech. The orange was finished, and he leant back, a cigarette between his hands. We had been discussing certain statesmen whose eloquence was not entirely dissociated from alcohol.

'I never drink anything before a speech,' said he.

'You were born with a large amount of champagne in your veins,' said I.

He laughed, and began to explain.

'I prepare to a certain extent,' he said, 'but there is much which one cannot prepare. In the opening phrases I am feeling my way — stretching out hands into the audience. Then, as my main theme develops, I vary it, modify it, adapt it to the audience which is before me. I see a hostile face in the crowd, and I speak directly to it. Then, when the speech is almost over, something comes to me which I can only describe as the "appeal." It is outside the main theme of the speech, it is purely emotional (though I don't think it overrules my reason), it is the whole joy of speaking.'

I remember hearing Carreño improvise on a theme of Liszt's. The analogy was perfect. The opening phrases — drifting chords of beauty — the quiet state-

ment of the main theme, the development, the unexpected twists of rhythm and harmony, the sudden inspiration (the 'appeal') which turned Liszt's theme into something greater than he had conceived, the final, purely oratorical chords at the conclusion . . .

'I am happiest at an overflow meeting,' he went on. 'I love to arrive at a meeting knowing nothing of what I am going to say except the opening words, "Mr. Chairman." On those occasions the anxiety is gone, because nothing very much is expected of one, while the exhilaration of the last meeting remains. I begin to speak, and an idea comes. I follow it, having no knowledge of where it will lead me. It takes me to another idea; the argument develops, strengthens. . . .' He paused abruptly. 'You see?'

I saw. He speaks in terms of music. That was conclusively proved by his criticism of a certain famous Cabinet Minister who has a quite unmerited reputation for eloquence. 'If a Frenchman who did not understand English were listening to him, he would think: "This is a poor speaker,"' said Lloyd George. In other words, a poor master of rhythm, with no judgment of harmony, of 'the bright balance of words.'

Lloyd George showed me that he had that sense in a far greater degree than I imagined. Leaning back, occasionally prodding the orange with an idle fork, he showed me that he was an artist as well as a politician. We were discussing invective, apropos of Winston's assault on Haig.

I recalled Macaulay's shattering indictment of Charles I. 'Do you remember it?' I said. 'It goes:

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

*"He was a scholar and a gentleman, a man of strict morals in private life. But he was false, imperious, obstinate, narrow-minded, ignorant of the temper of his people, unobservant of the signs of his times."*

He capped it with the essay on Barrere. His voice rang out, resonant and vibrating:

*"Renegade, traitor, slave, coward, liar, slanderer, murderer, hack-writer, police-spy — the one small service he could render to England was to hate her; and such as he was, may all who hate her be."*

And he glowered ahead of him, the sunlight from the window making his eyes glisten like a cat's. There was so much concentrated righteous indignation in that glance that, had he wished, I believe he could have withered the blossoms from the almond tree.

I despair of capturing on paper even a spark of his radiant vitality. He was talking all the time, and yet listening as well. He bubbled and sparkled and glittered. I had a strange sense that, although he was apparently sitting in his chair before me, he was not there at all. He was dancing round me, flying in and out of the window. His voice seemed to come now from the ceiling, now from the floor. Yet, when I reproduce what he actually said . . .

He spoke of some of the agony he endured during the war. He recalled Passchendaele. His summing-up was as concise as any essay of Macaulay. 'We attacked at the wrong time, in the wrong place, in the wrong way,' he said. 'The French army was exhausted, the position was easy to defend and difficult to assail, our Generals had not adequately examined the ground. I

was convinced of the folly of the experiment, but the majority of the Cabinet was against me, and I was overruled. What could I do? I could have resigned. But that would have divided the nation. I could have . . .'

I can hear his voice, echoing on. But they are the echoes of history, and you can read them for yourself. I can see him before me still, but so can you. I can still laugh over the many sallies with which he brightened his conversation – the story, for example, of Sir Henry Wilson's chauffeur, who said to him, 'Foreigners? We don't 'ate foreigners. We just don't care an 'ang about 'em.'

I can still marvel at the energy which had made him rise, as always, at dawn, to study all the newspapers before breakfast. No living man, surely, can read so many newspapers as he. Newspapers, indeed, colour his life to a very large extent. He told me that when he went abroad to have a holiday, he always made a point of reading, or having read to him, the principal newspapers of the country which he was visiting. 'It gives me a far greater sense of holiday-making,' he said. 'If I were to go on reading the same old English newspapers, whether I were in France or Italy or Spain, I should hardly realize that I had left England at all.' I myself should have thought that they would heighten the contrast. I remember finding a copy of the *New York Tribune* which some obliging tourist had left on the pavement of the Acropolis, and it seemed to make even sweeter the graces of that civilization among whose ruins I was standing.

Lloyd George would not have felt so. Put a news-

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

paper in his hand, and he is transported to the country where it was printed. And it is typical of him that instead of frowning, in the manner of the average English statesman, upon the American Press as something vulgar and noisy and slapdash, he realizes that in America are to be found some of the greatest newspapers in the world. 'In fact,' he said, 'I think that perhaps the best paper in the world is the *Christian Science Monitor*. Its foreign information is unrivalled. Its articles are first-rate. I remember, the other day, picking up a copy of the *Christian Science Monitor* in a club and finding in it a long and comprehensive article on Welsh education. Welsh education, if you please! Go and ask the average English editor to print an article on Welsh education, and see what happens. And yet in Boston, thousands of miles away, in a land bristling with its own educational problems, a great newspaper considers it worth while to devote its space to a movement of which even most Englishmen have never heard.'

I wish I could remember all the vivid pictures which he sketched for me. One remains clearly – that which described his association with Bonar Law. 'Morning after morning, I used to go in to see him, sitting at his desk before a mass of papers, his face the epitome of gloom. He'd show me a dispatch: "Have you seen this?" A report: "What can possibly be the end of this?" A cutting from a newspaper: "This is a pretty bad business." And, as he continued to unfold the tale of woe, my spirits steadily rose. Confronted with so utterly black a prospect, I would say, "Things can't

possibly be as bad as all this.” His pessimism brought out my optimism by a sheer sense of contrast. That was perhaps why we worked so well together.’ ☺

On the whole, I am inclined to think that this was the most exciting breakfast I ever had. The excitement continued even when we left the house, because as we emerged into the sunshine I saw two policemen waiting outside the gate. Bombs, explosions, ambushes, assassinations – all these things passed through my mind, in so electric a state was my spirit under his inspiration. However, I afterwards learnt that the policemen are always there. They keep incessant vigil. I hope they are good policemen.

## XXXV

W. J. LOCKE

or

An Intoxicated Ascetic

OPPOSITE the island of St. Marguerite, looking out over the blue bay of Cannes, is a villa where a man sits writing. In the interests of accuracy, it should be stated that the bay, when he writes, is a symphony of black and silver, for he works only at night. Still, he sits there, his window open, his manuscript tidily arranged beside him. And I should imagine that, in sunshine or in darkness, the outlook from that window must often have quickened his imagination.

I sat in his chair myself, and gazed and gazed. The garden outside was bright with flowers – stocks white and purple, pale, precious daffodils, a frivolous whirl of pink from a wind cherry tree, like the skirts of a chorus girl at the old Gaiety, the silhouette of a slender palm. Behind it all, the back-cloth of blue, blazing Mediterranean. And in the distance, St. Marguerite and its fortress, where for seventeen years the Man in the Iron Mask paced up and down in his cell, looking out on to this very hill where I was now sitting – a hill which, in those days, was barren of villas and knew nothing of the author of *The Beloved Vagabond*.

The Man in the Iron Mask was not the only person who knew nothing of W. J. Locke. A great many of

his readers know nothing about him, either. Let us, therefore, place him at his desk in the sunlight. There is a resemblance, if he will forgive me, to President Wilson. Locke, it is true, has straw-coloured hair and a more sympathetic mouth. He also has an English tailor, which makes such a difference in one's psychology, does it not? Otherwise the resemblance is remarkable.

On a brief acquaintance one would describe him as an ascetic who could become intoxicated on ink. His methods of creation, as I hope to indicate, are superbly irregular, but there the irregularity, one imagines, ends, in the head. He appears to be ascetic in all but his fancies.

His very first remark to me, illustrating this trait, caused me considerable agitation. It was delivered in a rather pained and acid tone, just as we all sat down to lunch at the Casino. He said, '*I think I should prefer a world without scents.*' At which I felt exceedingly worried. For, as I had hurried along to the Casino, a few minutes before, I had encountered a charming but somewhat flamboyant woman who was 'one-of-those-women-who-hate-keeping-anything-to-themselves.' And as we had talked she had playfully – one might almost say 'kittenishly' – seized my breast pocket handkerchief and squirted on to it a blob of perfume so fierce and strong that the whole promenade seemed imbued with oriental odours. When I left her I shook the handkerchief in the air – (I would swear that mauve clouds of perfume exuded from it) – and then rolled it into a tight ball in my pocket. But some sorts



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

of scent would escape even from a thick leaden casket, and this was one of those sorts. Hence my agitation.

*'I should prefer a world without scents.'*

He said it with a rather faint voice, and his complexion was quite pale. And he added: 'The ordinary perfume out of a bottle gives me real pain. If I smell a heavy magnolia, or a cluster of wisteria on a hot summer day, I suffocate.'

Feverishly I asked him if he wasn't refreshed by eau-de-Cologne. He merely observed that perhaps 'it had the saving grace of alcohol.'

In desperation, I took the accursed handkerchief from my pocket, and dropped it on the floor. There was a sudden sickening wave of perfume, and everybody at the table stopped talking. Then, I placed my foot on it, and the wave relapsed, and eventually died away. But I noticed that the bootboy at my hotel had a heavy, sickly look about the gills next day.

Let us return, from this awful scene, to the celebrated author's desk. It is like Wilson's desk as I saw it, scrupulously clean and neat. The cigarettes are neatly tipped with straw. The ink is dustless. By his side is a copy of a work which most authors, one imagines, would shun like the devil. It is called *The Usage of Words*, by an Oxford Don whose name, I believe, is Fowler, and it deals, in a most caustic manner, with the various clichés, false meanings, inaccuracies, jargons, etc., in which all of us who have the temerity to publish our thoughts are occasionally liable to be involved. The reason for the presence of this volume is obvious. Locke loves words. He is a writer,

*pur et simple*. I know few men of whom one could say the same. I myself might have been quite a successful *chef*. Michael Arlen might have conducted a brilliantly profitable Casino. Mr. A. S. M. Hutchinson might have been an admirable curate (I wish he had). But W. J. Locke, had he not been a writer, would have pined away, vanished into thin air. . . .

Listen to the way in which he described it. 'Words,' he said, 'are so beautiful, they never lose their fascination for me. I delight in stringing them together. I play with them as I would play with a jangle of bells. And I have a reverence for words. I cannot work them too hard. They are too precious to be strung together carelessly. If I take a thousand of them in a single day I feel that I have done enough. I feel, at least, that I have done all of which I am honestly capable.'

That, then, is how he works, in the room that looks out on to the blue waters. He strings words and fancies. When he writes there is always the sense that he is arranging a pattern. As a minor novelist, I find a perpetual delight in studying the methods of those who have become major novelists, and Locke encouraged me enormously by admitting that he let his stories develop themselves, that his characters dominated him, playing the strangest pranks and indulging in the most unexpected antics. There was never any question of a carefully worked-out plan, never any set programme to which his creatures must conform. 'Suppose that I'm writing about John and Susan,' he said. 'For some reason or other — and it's nothing to do with *me* — John falls in love with Susan, and they become engaged to

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

be married. Well, after a time, John may become a totally different person. He may develop all sorts of qualities which nobody – certainly not I – ever suspected. And so, one day I find myself writing a chapter in which, to my great relief, the engagement is broken off. *I* don't break it off. John and Susan break it off. They simply take the affair into their own hands. I am merely the chronicler of events.

'By this,' he continued, 'I don't mean to try to imply that I am a sort of heaven-born genius, working in a room that is filled with the beating of angels' wings. I merely mean that my characters become so real to me that they control me rather than I them. There are other ways of writing novels, of course, but I myself couldn't write in any other way. Nor, I believe, could a man like Dickens. Do you think that Dickens ever had the faintest idea of what Micawber, for example, was going to do when he appeared on the stage? I don't. I have the feeling that Micawber bounced about the room of his own accord, constantly surprising Dickens, constantly delighting him.'

I asked for an example of this theory, which has a great fascination for me, although Mr. George Moore would shatter me for saying so. 'Have you ever had a good man who turned into a loathsome villain before the book was finished?'

Locke sighed. 'My wife tells me that I can never draw a real villain,' he said. 'Apparently, I always take pity on him and begin to discover good qualities in him, and he ceases to be a villain at all. So I can't really judge. But I can show you how extraordinarily

elastic is the whole composition of my stories. For instance . . .'

He opened his diary and showed me a curious, scraggly chart, that looked as if the clerk of the weather had had a night out and wasn't quite sure whether he was drawing an anti-cyclone over Iceland or a cyclone over Piccadilly Circus. At various places on the chart were names and arrows. For instance, an arrow pointed from Henry to Julia (confirming me in the Piccadilly Circus theory), and here and there a cross marked a particularly intricate network of lines. 'That, you see' (I didn't), 'is the plan of the story. Certain lives crossing and intercrossing' (indicating the arrows), 'certain climaxes' (indicating the crosses). 'But I never keep to it. For instance, I am now writing a serial for publication in America. I've already written four chapters, and I only got the story last night. There's the story.' He turned over a page or two in the diary and showed me a few rambling sentences. I could make nothing of it. Nor, I honestly believe, could Locke. He cannot create stories in that way. He can only allow his stories to create themselves. And I would sooner bet on the result of the Derby than on the result of a Locke romance before the last sentence was written.

## XXXVI

FREDERICK LONSDALE

*or*

A Modern Marcus Aurelius

MOST people's faces automatically suggest the artists who should paint them. I have known women who seemed to cry out for the mists of McEvoy, and men who demanded the solid technique and vibrant browns of Glyn Philpot. There are a few girls who are born Johns, and others who have, as it were, become Johns through force of example. And one knows several celebrated men who imagine themselves to be Van Dycks when, in fact, they are perfect Phil Mays.

But Frederick Lonsdale is pure pre-Raphaelite. If I had the drawing of him, I should place him looking into one of those round convex mirrors which reflect so much, so brilliantly, in so small a space. In the mirror, with meticulous detail, would be painted a crowd of exceedingly smart people, dancing. The mirror would a little exaggerate their gestures, a little distort some of their expressions. Its silver surface would heighten a cheek's pallor, paint more deeply a mouth's red. And in high relief at its side one would catch a glimpse of a thin face, with a high forehead, an irregular nose, a humorous mouth, and very sharp, very bright eyes, watching.

## F R E D E R I C K      L O N S D A L E

He is one of the best watchers I know. Some men, I believe, might go on writing plays even if they were stricken with blindness, just as Beethoven wrote colossal harmonies long after he had ceased to hear even his own voice. Not so Frederick Lonsdale. He must watch — watch everything and everybody: the expression of a woman at a night club, the gestures of a bore at a dinner table, the agreeable conceit of a young man pushing his way through a crowded row of stalls. He must hear real stories, that he may turn them into plays, live among real tragedies and real comedies, being perpetually stimulated by the rhyme and clatter of life.

That is what gives his plays their photographic reality. I am constantly meeting his characters all over London. I have endured dozens of dinners of the type which occurs in the second act of *Spring Cleaning* — without, I regret to add, their dramatic climax. He has 'got' us all under a microscope, just as the pre-Raphaelites 'got' the petals of a tiger-lily under a microscope.

That is why his plays, brilliant as they are to-day, are for to-day only. In a hundred years' time St. James's Street may well be buzzing with aeroplanes carrying crowds of our great-grandchildren to see a revival of William Somerset Maugham's *The Circle*. But I doubt if they will be going to see a similar revival of *The Last of Mrs. Cheyney*, any more than they flock nowadays to the galleries where they have hung the Holman Hunts. *Le dernier cri* is a pleasant cry, but it is a cry which has no echo.

All of which worries Frederick Lonsdale not at all.

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

I called on him one day, to find him reading, of all things, the *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*. He passed the book over to me, pointing to a passage which he had marked with a sciggly line of pencil. I read:

*'How strangely men act! They will not praise those who are living at the same time and living with themselves. But to be themselves praised by posterity, by those whom they have never seen nor ever will see — this they set much value on.'*

'Them,' one might say, 'is Mr. Lonsdale's sentiments.' And I wish he would write his own meditations, for they would be far more amusing than those of Marcus, who always seemed to me (until I met Professor Nicholas Murray Butler) to be the Prince of Platitude.

Perhaps I might begin to write them for him. He gives one such good advice, administered in a soft agreeable voice, a glass of beer by his side, between the puffs of a cigarette. For example, of writing plays: *'Never make a man wholly bad or wholly good.'* It sounds a trite, almost banal observation, but anybody who has ever endeavoured to write plays will realize that it is a valuable one. A play is so utterly different from a novel. In a novel one can study one's character in a hundred seasons and a hundred moods. One can raise the curtain of his mind and explore both its lights and its shadows. But in a play your character must be up and doing something, and how little time he has to do it in!

I thought of that odd young man in *Spring Cleaning*, with the powdered face and crimped hair. 'Do you think you followed your own advice in this case?' I

asked him. He nodded. 'After all, he was amusing. He could answer back. The women liked him. He wasn't entirely monstrous.' I agreed, and, looking back on his plays, I remember that the characters are constantly contradicting themselves. They will do something abominable in Act I, and make up for it in Act II. It is almost as though he felt a personal solicitude for his own puppets.

Or, to write down another meditation, '*Take a big subject and treat it lightly.*' That, after all, is what he is always doing. He told me that he had a horror of being dull — how that thought makes one's pen tremble in one's fingers! And so, when he has to pad, as all dramatists must pad, he pads with diamonds, or at least with very good paste. If you listen to one of his plays with sufficient care, you will notice that his best remarks always occur in those rare but unavoidable moments when the action is hung up in order to allow somebody to change their dress or put on a false beard.

One other thing — the reason why he writes plays. Although he apparently loathes the little set of nerve-racked decadents whom he caricatures so well, although they make him clench his teeth and utter the wickedest words, he is not to be regarded, as some kindly souls regard him, as a sort of Maximilian Harden, set out to purge society. I should not imagine that he had any illusions about purging society. It never is purged, and it never will be. And only fools and bores will ever try to purge it.

No. He writes for money, and he makes no bones about it. May I diverge into a brief irrelevance? One



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

day, as a boy, I walked across the Wiltshire Downs with a generously proportioned figure, who capered ahead at great speed, sometimes singing snatches of Sullivan, sometimes wiping his eyes (for there was a fierce wind), and sometimes emitting brilliant observations on the art of letters. The figure was William Temple, the present Bishop of Manchester, and I listened to him with considerable respect. But when he assured me of his conviction that Shakespeare wrote for money, I had a severe shock. At fifteen one still has illusions about authors.

Well, time has persuaded me that the Bishop was right — time, and one's personal contacts with other writers. Frederick Lonsdale is the latest to confess himself to me. 'I write for money,' he says, 'and I should be telling damned lies if I said I didn't.'

'But that isn't quite all that is to be said on the subject,' he went on. 'I have a theory that the motive which makes an author actually sit down at his desk, dip his pen in the ink and write, is the desire for money, by which I mean a desire to winter in the South of France, or to buy a country house, or to hang pearl necklaces round somebody's neck. But when that motive has done its work — when, that is to say, it has locked his door and put the pen in his hand — it ceases to be of importance, provided the man has any real stuff in him. He begins to write, and he no longer thinks of money. The Riviera and the house and the necklaces are forgotten. He remembers only that he is creating something, and the pleasures of creation are keener than any pleasures he can buy.'

## XXXVII

SIR EDWIN LUTYENS

*or*

An Artist *Malgré Lui*

I WAS determined to stop him telling stories. Not that they were bad stories, but because they were good. They made me giggle, and took my mind off the things I really did want to talk to him about. And so, on this late afternoon in spring, as we together emerged through the gracious door of his office in Queen Anne's Gate, to take a walk, I fixed my eye upon him and said to myself: 'This time I am going to be a thoroughly bad listener.'

We began our walk. His pipe was now quite alight, and deep placid puffs were emerging from the figure on my right. I thought that the moment was ripe for broaching my deep-laid plans. 'Wouldn't it be rather marvellous to go for a long ride on top of a bus?'

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye. 'Talking of buses . . .' he said.

'Yes. I *was* talking of buses.'

'Talking of buses,' he repeated firmly, 'there was once a little boy who was travelling on the top of a bus, who said to his mother, "Ain't we ever going to get off this bloody bus?" Do you know what she replied?'

'No,' I said, with bitter resignation.

ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

'She replied, "'Enery, 'ow often 'ave I told you not to say that word – ain't?"'

On the heels of this story another followed.

'Did I tell you about the Scotsman who was looking for a man in a mist?' he said.

Quickly I replied, 'Yes.' It was a shameless lie, because he had never told me the same story twice.

'No, I didn't,' said Lutyens, 'because I only heard it this morning.'

'Well, it must be a new Scotsman in a new mist,' I answered.

'Yes,' he said amiably. 'It must. There was once a Scotsman who met a man in a fog, and said, "Have you seen Macphierson?" "I'm not sure," replied the other. "I've seen one man, but he was either a very wee man wi' a beard, or a very tall man wi' a sporran."'

I refused to laugh (as a matter of fact, I had no great desire to laugh at that one), and with a sigh, he stopped telling stories, and became Sir Edwin Lutyens, chief architect of the Empire. For you see, we were at the foot of the Duke of York's steps, and, when you are at the foot of the Duke of York's steps, though you have probably never noticed it, a very curious phenomenon of the architect's craft is observable.

He stopped dead at the bottom of the steps and pointed upwards. 'Look!' he said. 'Do you see?'

I looked. I saw steps with the sunshine on them. I saw a pillar rising against a lemon-coloured sky. And – as I observed more closely I saw a sort of blob on the right. It looked like the head of John the Baptist, care-

lessly deposited there by one of the enviable residents of Carlton House Terrace.

'That blob?' I said. 'What is it?'

'Precisely,' replied Lutyens. 'What is it? It is the head of King Edward the Seventh. And it is in the wrong place.'

Then, with a sigh of relief, I noticed that his pipe had gone out, but that his eyes were alight with the artist's fire. And I knew he was going to talk as I wished him to talk.

'That ought to show you,' he said, 'something of the snares which we poor architects are always meeting. It's one of London's worst examples of foreshortening, or rather cross-shortening. It ought to have been placed on the steps, so that the feet of the horse were level with the top step. Still, it's too late now.'

With a disapproving frown at King Edward's desecrated head, of which the accompanying neck and body were now jerkily coming into view, he led the way up the steps.

'During the war,' he said, 'a certain great man asked me how much it would cost to take the Duke of York off the column and to put Kitchener in his place. I said it would cost five shillings.'

'Five shillings?' I was fascinated by the sight of King Edward's feet, which were just looming above us.

'Yes. Half a crown for each moustache.'

We paused on the top of the steps, feeling slightly awed by the monuments. 'How right Rosebery was,' said Lutyens, 'when he observed that the best possible monument to the last war would be to pull down

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

all the monuments that were erected in the Boer War.'

It was then that he began to talk about his ideal city. I do not know how the subject was introduced. I have a faint suspicion that I badgered him into it by sheer persistence.

But I am not in the least ashamed of myself for doing so, for I wanted, as it were, to torture myself with the thought of the London that might have been. The London that is (and more especially the London that is yet to be) fills me with a pain that grows daily more acute. Sometimes I close my eyes and indulge in an orgy of mental spring cleaning. Imbued with the power that only comes to one in dreams, I dance down street after street, flicking portentous statesmen off their pedestals and watching them crash down in a cloud of dust. With a vast hammer I smash the horror that is Regent Street, throw the nauseous mess with a few giant handfuls into the Thames, and recreate, in a delicately coloured dream, the fairy fabric that was Nash's. I take a vast scraper and tear the vulgar signs from Piccadilly Circus, I destroy every single tile-faced abomination which houses the products of Messrs. Lyons and Company, I throw away the Marble Arch, kick up the Albert Memorial, and canter through Hyde Park, uprooting all those filthy little iron railings and sidewalks which do their daily worst to mar the gracious stretches of London's grass.

'My ideal city,' he said, 'could never exist. I should want endless women, sympathetic clients, and an inexhaustible supply of the right sort of stone.'

'I give you them all,' I said.

'That would be only demoralizing. One works far better with a certain amount of intelligent opposition. A building that is merely an abstract ideal is always a little inhuman.'

'Well, then, I give you the intelligent opposition.'

'In that case' – he paused a moment to allow a bus to snort itself past – 'in that case, my ideal city would be built, if it were in England, of Portland stone. Look at Wren's plan after the destruction of the Great Fire.'

'Or Washington,' I said perversely. 'At Washington the radiation from a central point is lovely, but it leads to a lot of nasty little grass plots, simply because of the geometry of the thing.'

'Well, you get over that by great open spaces. Look at Paris.' I looked at Paris.

'In Paris, everything radiates from the Arc de Triomphe. But there aren't any piffing little grass plots. The Champs Élysées is the ideal example in the whole world of the sort of vista which everybody like myself is always longing to achieve. When you look up the Champs Élysées it is like looking at the back-cloth of some marvellous scene painter. Everything is so graceful and so easy. The whole line is so melodious. One has no sense of difficulty. Yet there *were* colossal difficulties. They had to cut through a whole hill and lay the ground back in terraces. That's where Washington has failed.'

'How?'

'Because its vistas are blocked by objects bigger than

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

they can hold. That great obelisk is far too big. Half the things there are far too big. There's no sense of a single rhythm.' He sighed, an almost melancholy sigh. We were passing a particularly hideous modern building (which I naturally may not name) and it seemed to weigh on his mind.

'Does London depress you, too, then?'

He did not answer my question. Instead he said: 'It would be so wonderful, if one were building one's ideal city. The arrangement of the vistas, I mean. I feel exactly like a scene painter. And that is the right feeling to have. To create something beautiful which always ended, at the finish of an interrupted avenue, with some form of spectacle. Everything else subdued to it. You know what Carlyle said when, for the first time, he noticed Chelsea Hospital?'

'No.'

'He said, "I have been passing this building for thirty years, and this is the first day that I have noticed it. I see that it is the work of a great gentleman." That's the fault of modern London, of any big city. We're all so damned anxious to be conspicuous that we achieve no sort of unity. And then, too, we have absurd ideas about what must be done and what mustn't.'

We were nearly in Trafalgar Square now, and I feared that Trafalgar Square might stop him talking. But no.

'When I was designing Delhi,' he said, 'they told me that, in order to show sympathy with India, I must employ a pointed arch. I had no intention of using a pointed arch. So I sent back the following reply:

*"When God created India, He did not show His wide sympathy by pointing the rainbow." "*

I wonder if the gentleman to whom that reply was addressed ever quite realized that it contained a whole philosophy of æsthetics?

We were now in Trafalgar Square, which has always seemed to me to be typical of the English race, because it is so full of glory and so full of muddle. Against a sky of red, white, and blue, the Nelson column rose like a warning finger. We stood by the parapet, hoping that the pigeons would behave themselves. And Lutyens turned to me and said:

'You see, it's really beyond criticism.'

'All this?'

'I mean, the thing for which it stands is so great that one can't say what one thinks about the execution of it.'

'Can't one?' I was certain that he could if he wanted. I remembered, with exquisite clarity, the design which a few years ago he had made for the clearing up of Trafalgar Square. If it had been adopted we should have had one of the finest open spaces in the world. But it was not adopted.

'Of course,' he said, as though he were saying something slightly naughty, 'it's all too big. Look over there.'

I looked. 'The scale of *that* is admirable. Now, if everything had been like that, and if the four lions . . .'

He paused. I looked to see what had caught his attention. His eyes seemed to be fixed on the distant sky. I followed their direction, and I saw flashing across a building on the other side of the Square a



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

message in shimmering silver. It read: '*The price of the franc at noon in Paris to-day was 135.75.*'

This was terrible. If our examination of Trafalgar Square was to be interrupted in this rude manner by the enterprise of the *Daily Express*, we would never get anywhere.

'I wish I had francs to sell,' said Lutyens.

'It is only the influence of Trafalgar Square that makes you say things like that,' I said. 'You were saying something about lions.'

'Ah, yes, I should like them much better if they had been stuffed. Think what a subject for a really competent taxidermist! Think how they would be in keeping with the spirit of the age! . . . Think . . .'

His eye was fixed again on that damnable news message. It seemed to exercise a positively hypnotic effect on him. Feeling slightly dizzy, I traced out the message. It began: '*At the Crystal Palace this afternoon . . .*'

Lutyens turned away before the message was finished. I think it made him feel dizzy.

'Talking of the Crystal Palace,' he said, 'I was once informed by a celebrated peer of the realm that it might be bought for Imperial purposes. He asked me what was the most suitable purpose I could suggest for it.'

'And what did you suggest?'

'Well, I asked him how much money was available. And when I was informed that money was no object, I told him that the best thing to do with it would be to put it under a glass case.'

Again his eye wandered. But this time the snaky silver news was in the middle of a message:

*'Was found dead this afternoon with the bodies of her three children by her side.'*

'How disgusting civilization is!' he said, with a disapproving frown.

'Yes,' I remarked brightly. 'That's why I think it's so restful to look at those lions.'

He glanced at the lions for the last time.

'If I had my way,' he whispered, 'I would put a gramophone in the tummy of each of them, and make them purr.'

## XXXVIII

ROSE MACAULAY

*or*

A Cave Woman

A FINGER was darting quickly over the tops of the columns of an evening newspaper. Now and then the finger paused inquiringly. The sort of headings at which it paused were:

‘Tennis Bombshell.’

‘Mystery Woman.’

‘£1,000-a-year Wife.’

‘Wonder Mansion.’

If, in the manner of the cinema, we were to throw a beam of light on to the finger, and make that beam crawl slowly upwards, we should eventually arrive at a slim neck, on which was perched – ‘perched’ is the only word – the usual number of feminine features, agreeably disposed, and lit with a sparkle of unusual intelligence. For the moment the dominant expression ‘registered’ on those features is one of bewilderment. And as the portrait dims, and the sub-title flashes across the screen, we learn the reason for her bewilderment. She is saying to herself: ‘What do they mean? What do they *mean*?’

Does ‘tennis bombshell,’ for example, mean that Suzanne Lenglen, in one of those fits of girlish ‘tem-

perament' which have endeared her to all sportsmen, has whimsically served a Mills grenade at Mrs. Lambert Chambers? And can even the exigencies of space excuse any editor for allowing so vile a phrase as 'mystery woman'? Besides, according to the text, the only mysterious thing about the woman was that the Press did not know every detail of her life. Were all women 'mystery' women to editors? As for the £1,000-a-year wife, what vital difference was there between her and the £785 18s. 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ d.-a-year wife? And if there was no vital difference, why put it in? And thus, and thus.

That is one of the disadvantages of having a Rose Macaulay mind. No possessor of such a mind can read an evening newspaper with comprehension. Hers is the most literal and accurate mind I have ever known, with the possible exception of Mr. J. B. S. Haldane, and a don at a Northern University who is now in a lunatic asylum. Edison is a muddle-headed dilettante compared to her. Her love of neatness, both of thought and expression, amounts to a passion.

One day she showed me a letter which she had just received from one of the readers of her books, who imagined, for some unknown reason, that the author had shown a disrespect in *Crewe Train*, for the great mysteries of life. He had thus admonished her: '*I am a bit of a cynic myself, but the universe runs on, and no cynical view does justice to its awe-inspiring mystery. Can you make a single star? There are over 300,000,000. Can you make a retina of your eye, with six layers of differing cells, in a length which is only one thickness of this*

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

*paper? Or your cochlea (the inner ear) with 10,000 hairlets? The answer is in the negative!*

She held out this letter to me, and when I had recovered from it, she again asked her favourite question: 'What does he *mean*? Does he seriously imagine that I rush about the house trying to make a cochlea with 10,000 hairlets? And if he does not imagine it, why does he ask unnecessary questions? Why are there so many people who are always asking unnecessary questions? I never made any claims to be able to manufacture cochleas in *Crewe Train*. And what do people *mean* when they say I am "cynical" and "bitter" and "unduly satirical" and "vitriolic"? Sometimes I see these adjectives applied to me, because of my treatment of certain characters in my novels whom I imagined I had treated with gentle affection. I should love to know the exact definition of "cynical," but I don't suppose I ever shall. What does it *mean*?'

I cannot tell her. Nobody can. I can only agree, marvelling that so logical a woman can produce such bubbling and illogical creatures as those which dance through her pages. Her clear-headedness and eternal accuracy would have alarmed me, had I not discovered, by accident, that even she is fallible.

The news is too good to keep to myself. In *Catchwords and Claptrap* she refers to the 'third-rate fiction writers' who, when they are describing a man's emotion, state that 'he wiped his glasses.' Miss Macaulay shatters this phrase in a few sentences, which I have quoted before, and shall probably quote again. 'I am informed,' she writes, 'that this is not what actually

occurs, and that when tears gather in the eyes they do not spray out horizontally so as to wet the glasses, but either remain in the eyes unfallen until reabsorbed, or roll vertically down the cheeks; nor do they give out steam or mist; therefore this process of wiping the glasses is not called for more at lachrymose moments than at others.'

Very well. I was lunching the other day with three Americans. (I am not boasting about it. It has been done before.) Between the grape-fruit and the turbot I recited the above passage, just to create good feeling. Instantly the Americans vehemently denied this slur on the emotional capacities of their sex. They all, of course, wore glasses, and they all swore that they found it constantly necessary to wipe those glasses whenever a lachrymose moment occurred. I prolonged the argument in the hope that they would cry, out of sheer rage, thereby giving me a practical demonstration. They did not get as far as that, but I have no doubt that they were telling the truth. And since the eyes of Americans – if they will forgive me for saying so – are neither larger nor wetter than the eyes of other men, I fear that Miss Macaulay must agree that here, for once, she is wrong!

I often wonder if the wild and unsociable figure of the girl Denham in *Crewe Train* was the symbol of spiritual revolt of Miss Macaulay from the 'literary' atmosphere which no author can entirely escape. Denham hated unnecessary talk. She liked things that one could see and touch and carve. She also was convinced that there were far too many books in the world. (So is

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

Miss Macaulay, but I am glad to say that she does not allow this conviction to influence her.) And so Denham went away to Cornwall and hid in a cave.

Subtly and with a devilish desire to identify Miss Macaulay with her own heroine, I asked her if she herself liked caves. Yes. She liked them very much indeed. She supposed that every one did. But the days of the best caves, alas! were over. They were too often either blocked up or occupied by damp and loquacious bathers. 'There is a cave I know in Cornwall,' I said, 'which is never blocked, and never occupied by bathers, damp or dry.'

'Where is it?' she demanded. I told her. I can't think why, because it is really my cave. Nobody else has ever been there, except a few local fishermen. And nobody else, certainly, has ever dammed the stream which runs outside, nor built such fierce and leaping fires from the wood with which the beach is so plentifully strewn. However, it would have been cruel to deny her. She is one for whom caves were made. And as I left her, she said that a cave to hide in, a stream to dam, and a fire to build were certainly among the important needs of life, 'even if it does sound like a bad Stevenson lyric.'

I fully believe she meant it. All the same, she must be acquitted of closely resembling her cave-heroine, for she is sociable, conversational, lives, for choice, in London, and likes people.

## XXXIX

JOHN McCORMACK

*or*

Song, Champagne, and Strife

HAD he been a stockbroker, the fact that he drank champagne for lunch would not at all have excited me. I should merely have thought him to be celebrating the fact that some share — say Van Ryn Deep — had jumped up another five shillings. (This is a sinister and insidious hint, because Van Ryn Deep is a real share, and I have just bought some.) Nor should I have viewed with such amazement the glass of brandy which he quaffed later, nor opened my eyes at the cigar which followed it. But to observe John McCormack doing these things . . .

You see, I have been brought up in a Spartan tradition of singers. I have sat at gloomy meals while a certain famous tenor wondered if an extra sip of Vichy water would impair his rendering of Rodolfo next Wednesday week. I have seen Melba sending away waitresses in a flurry because they had salted the ethereal omelette which is almost her sole sustenance on the day she sings. I have seen bulky basses, with voices as powerful as a fog-horn, grow quite pale when one offers them a cigarette. And here was John McCormack, with his voice of fine-spun silk, eating, drinking, and making



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

merry, for to-morrow — he was to sing at the Albert Hall.

The spectacle made me think deeply. I looked at him closely. The large, clean-shaven face was intensely animated. The eyes rolled and sparkled. The head now and then jerked back a lock of hair which strayed over on to his forehead. The exceeding mobile mouth was perpetually opening in a broad grin, as story after story went the round of the table. I wish I could remember some of them, but I always forget that sort of story. (Not the sort you mean.) John McCormack, however, did not forget them.

And as I saw him enjoying life so whole-heartedly, I wondered if all the other artists were wrong. Was the Spartan routine so very necessary? Were cigarettes so evil? Was champagne so destructive? I cannot believe it. McCormack does exactly as he chooses. He feels that he was born into the world firstly to live and secondly to sing. He therefore lives the life of any of the rest of us, and it certainly does not seem to hurt him. For whatever you may say about his method of singing, you cannot deny that his voice is as exquisite as ever, with the sweet timbre of one to whom adolescence is only a recent memory.

After lunch I realized more than ever the enjoyment which he manages to extract from life. We went back to his hotel to wait for a telephone call which was coming through at four o'clock. That does not sound very exciting, but the telephone call was from New York, and we happened to be sitting in a room in a London hotel. As far as I was concerned, the waiting process

very soon gave me the fidgets. I sat back, looking at the little black instrument as though it might explode. At any moment the bell would ring and a voice would echo over thousands of miles of ocean. But to McCormack it was all a huge game. 'She mayn't have got up yet,' he said, dancing round the room ('she' being his wife). 'It's eleven o'clock in New York now. Gee!' He said 'Gee!' as only an Irish-American could say it. And then the bell rang. How anybody could carry on such a bubbling conversation over any telephone, even if one were only telephoning across the street, I cannot imagine. Still, McCormack did it. And from the little tinkling echoes of laughter which I could hear coming from the mouthpiece — echoes from another continent — I gathered that he was not talking in vain.

In all this, you may say, there is a certain childishness. That is quite true. He struck me, all the time that I was with him, as a large, bounding infant. Take this question of nerves. Every artist, of course, suffers from nerves before he makes his appearance on the platform. (The only exception I know to this rule is Kreisler.) But McCormack has only to be talked to by somebody who treats him like an infant to lose his nerves altogether. It is true that the somebody is a brilliant Irish doctor, who has specialized in methods of suggestion, but the analogy holds. I should like to be able to draw a picture of the two together — McCormack, worried, apprehensive; Dr. — growling at him amiably, hitting him in the back, and then soothing him with some of the fieriest language which has fallen even upon my accustomed ears. 'Och, you — son of a —

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

gun. Pull yourself together, and let the – audience know the sort of – stuff you can show them when you’ve got this – out of your – head.’ And as he listens to the familiar tongue, a radiant smile gradually creeps over McCormack’s features. And he goes out and sings without a trace of nerves, transferring the smile from his face to ours.

As a singer he is, I think, better to-day than he has ever been, perhaps because he is singing an increasing proportion of good music. He used, at one time, to sing the dreariest stuff. He interested me by his description of the manner in which he arranges his programmes. ‘All my programmes fall into four parts,’ he said, holding up four fingers, as though this proposition might be a little too much for me without optical assistance. ‘In part one I sing the songs which I owe to myself as an artist – Bach, Handel, Mozart. In part two I sing the songs which I feel the public ought to love, whether at first they want to love them or not – Wolf, Schubert – some of the purest melodies ever written. In part three I sing the songs which I owe to Ireland – simple folk-songs which have been more to me than perhaps any other music in the world. In part four I sing the popular songs which most of the public come to hear.

‘Now – just a minute.’ The four fingers were still uplifted. ‘You may say that I ought to sing more of part one and less of parts three and four. But, after all, the public come to hear parts three and four, and the man that pays the piper ought to be allowed to call the tune. Besides, though I give them the popular stuff

(and I try to put a little more into it than you may imagine it to deserve), they get the other as well. I get them into the hall, and I give them what they want, but I educate them as well. Do you see? And, to their astonishment, they find themselves loving the Schubert and the Bach as much as they love the other things.'

The idea, as he put it, was entrancing. One had the sense once more of the small boy luring his companions into a barn with the promise of sweets, and then giving them something very different. But that is carrying the idea too far, for McCormack really seemed to want to make the great public who have heard the voice of beauty through his Irish folk-songs hear it also through the music of the masters.

Some English people say a great many hard things about McCormack. Men call him a traitor and a renegade because he became an American citizen during the war. Men are constantly recalling a certain episode in Adelaide when, apparently, there was some trouble about the National Anthem. I do not know exactly what is supposed to have happened — whether he would not sing it, or whether they played it in the middle of 'Che gellida manina.' But I do know two things about the story. I know the people of Adelaide, and I cannot imagine that they are the sort of people who could disassociate a man's politics from his profession. (I am not blaming them for that.) And I know McCormack, and I cannot imagine anybody more Irish or more calculated to rub people up the wrong way if he felt so inclined.

At any rate, he is honest about himself. 'During the

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

war,' he told me, 'I went to see President Wilson and asked what I could do to help. Only, for the sake of glory, I said to him, don't put me anywhere near the firing-line, for I should be scared to death.' Which seems to me, at least, explicit.

## XL

EDDIE MARSH

*or*

For Ever England

I REMEMBER, first, in that lemon-coloured twilight of spring, a red carpet. It was the reddest carpet, the most sweetly superfluous carpet, that can ever have stretched over the historic pavements of Gray's Inn. It was, as well, the untidiest carpet, full of lumps and twists, well calculated to fell any but the most agile débutantes or the most experienced dowagers. It felled me, so that I blasphemed to the fading skies. But I did not mind. For, you see, I was dining with Eddie Marsh.

Eddie is, I suppose, unique. Nobody could have been secretary to so many portentous personages and yet have remained an undergraduate. Think of it! Joseph Chamberlain was the first; then came Lyttleton; then Winston Churchill and a wild trip to East Africa; then Asquith; then Devonshire; then J. H. Thomas; then — but I think we need a little fresh air. If I had ever been secretary to so many things as that, I should long ago have retired on an income derived partly from blackmail and partly from the royalties of my indiscretions.

Yet, as you see him, in this aforesaid lemon-coloured twilight, you would find only something very English,

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

fluttering with enthusiasm, urbane, to an American, perhaps, grotesque. He is rather like English country-house life – no American could possibly copy him. If they tried, they would produce something quite fantastic. For here is the patron of arts who is not a patron, the diplomatist who has no secrets, the critic who is a child, the man of the world who is yet a school-boy. Watch him as he sits, a pink lady on his right, a green lady on his left, and holds up an amber glass to the light. In his eyes there is all the lore of the connoisseur of subtle vintages. On his lips is the smile of the boy who is having a ninepenny port. In fact, he is the amateur *in excelsis*. And in America, where they make a profession even of conversation, or in France, where one must carry a diploma in one's pocket before one is allowed to make an epigram, or in Germany, where Cupid himself is a bachelor of arts, they would not understand him. Yet how well, in his own particular niche, I understand him.

Eddie Marsh is not an Edwardian, nor a product of the war, nor a Georgian. He is not a political force, nor a critic, nor a creative artist. He is rather a scholar who has strayed from the fold, a Bohemian in a clean collar, a civil servant who can see the sunsets through the windows. I do not know which of his enthusiasms is the keenest. But some of them, I am convinced, are all wrong.

His love of the theatre, for instance, is so fevered that at times it seems to deprive him of his reason. If he were a dramatic critic his pen would ever be dipped in gold, and each play would be a greater masterpiece than

the last. There was once presented, I recall, a deplorable work at the St. James's Theatre, by name *Pollyana*. It was an 'uplift' play. Its central figure was a 'sunny' little girl who arrived from some unpleasant colony to brighten the lives of several revolting old male relatives. When any of these old men had a stomach-ache she would smile sweetly and say, 'How glad you must be that you have not broken your neck,' or words to that effect. She had also a habit of falling on her knees and piping appropriate sentiments to the bust of her departed mother (which, from the stalls, looked singularly like Epstein's Rima).

I rose, after the first act of this horror, to stagger to the bar. On my way there I met Eddie. Tears were in his eyes. I gripped his arm. 'I feel like that, too,' I said. 'Come and have a drink.'

He blew his nose. 'Yes,' he said, 'I think I will. It's so terribly pathetic, isn't it?'

I looked at him closely. The truth dawned on me. The play had really moved him. That sickly, infuriating child had danced her way into his heart. Eddie, with all his culture, all his knowledge, was loving this hotch-potch of sentimental folly.

'I despair of you,' I said. 'I shall never listen to anything you say about the theatre again.'

'I'm sorry.' He gave a final sniff. 'I can't help it.'

So we drank our whiskies-and-soda in silence for a while, and then we talked of other things. Eddie's talk makes one wonder what the Society column of the *Daily Mail* would have been had it been written by Walter Pater. It springs from the events of yesterday,



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

yet is informed by the culture of all time. It has often a trivial subject, but it is always exquisitely ornamental. It is chaste – yet there are ‘naughtinesses.’ They dart from his lips like puffs of smoke, troubling the otherwise serene atmosphere in which he dwells. One talks to him in crystalline language – always a little better than one talks to anyone else. One’s acidity about the last first night is always a little more acid, one’s praise of the last trifle of modern art always glows a little more fervently. But his talk, and yours, is clear, tranquil, undisturbed. It floats in the ether, dehumanized. Until the naughtiness comes. And then, poof! – one’s soul seems to wriggle back into the finite.

For a moment, let me think myself an artist. Let me imagine that it is a summer evening in Gray’s Inn, and that I am sitting by the open window of Eddie’s chambers putting the finishing touches to his portrait. So many colours glow dimly in this fading light. The walls themselves are a whispering battleground of a hundred tints. I recall the rich green of some Gertler trees, some fields of blue and rose that spring from the dainty imagination of John Nash, a thunderous landscape by Charles Cundall.

They are hung in the wildest confusion, yet they attain a subtle harmony. I do not know by what miracle that harmony is obtained, unless it be by the apparently irrelevant knowledge that the owner of these pictures has for all of them an abounding love. Some seem to me exquisite, others harsh but stimulating, a few insane. Yet I would not change one of them, nor wipe from

their frames the smallest particle of dust which occasionally obscures them.

And then – against this background – their owner. The setting sun flashes on his eyeglass, and in it, as he turns, is reflected the tiny, emerald arabesque of summer trees. The head is tilted on one side, as though listening for the stammering echoes of the next poet-to-be, drifting down the still darkened corridors of time. The eyes dart hither, thither, like the eyes of an intelligent bird. The eyebrows have the true Beardsley twist, giving to the face a piquancy which it would otherwise lack, turning it from the face of an ascetic don to the face of a man of the world.

And as, in imagination, I let my brush drink its fill of dusky blue and secret green, I say to myself, 'Yes, Eddie, no country but England could produce you. You have been an amazing receptacle for beauty. You can still conjure before one the vision of young genius which has been slaughtered or has grown old. You are still the friend of Rupert Brooke, and while you live I feel that perhaps he lives, too. In an age of boredom, in an age when the young artist is crucified, you are to be found always, pleading for him passionately, your head still tilted, your voice breaking with sincerity. You are that rarest of creatures – a generous man. I believe that some of your enthusiasms are mistakes, that in your eternal pilgrimage you have sometimes bowed the knee before the shrine of pinch-beck idols. But God forbid that I should stop you!'

And, as I finish this soliloquy, I reach out my hand for the tube of paint marked 'gold.' I hold it up. It

ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

glitters in the dusk. I squeeze it, and like a lazy flame it lolls on to my brush. Slowly, and with infinite reverence, I trace a halo round the head of Edward Marsh, and sign myself, in the foreground.

## XLI

CYRIL MAUDE

*or*

Amiability Personified

EVERY artist has at least one ulterior motive for being an artist. Even when he loves his art with a true passion, he must have the ulterior motive to give him an extra urge. I know a violinist who turned himself from a very ordinary amateur into a brilliant concert-hall attraction simply because it seemed the easiest way of escaping for long periods from his wife. I know several authors who have written their best books merely to spite their worst enemies. And, of course, the number of fine actresses who owe their first success to an overwhelming desire for a latchkey is legion.

The ulterior motive of Mr. Cyril Maude is hot-water pipes. I do not know if hot-water pipes have always – as it were – glistened before him, urging him higher and higher, spurring him on when he was disconsolate, warming him when he was chilled and discouraged, but certainly hot-water pipes are playing that important moral rôle in his life to-day. Perhaps I should say the desire for hot-water pipes. For he himself told me that it was in order to instal ‘h.w.p.’ (I cannot go on writing ‘hot-water pipes’ in full, because they begin to sound faintly improper) – to instal ‘h.w.p.’ in his Devonshire home that he emerged from his retirement.

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

All of this is not quite as flippant as it sounds. For the interesting thing about Cyril Maude is that he is a home bird – perhaps all the more of a home bird because all his life he has had so often to fly away from his nest. It sounds very obvious and stale to say that ‘Mr. Maude is never happier than when strolling in the garden of his charming Devonshire home, and tells me that he is greatly looking forward to the day when he will be able to leave the stage for good’ – but it happens to be true, and at least it is succinct.

The ‘h.w.p.’ are, however, only a part of Mr. Maude’s ulterior motive. The dining-room has to be newly – or perhaps I should say anciently – panelled; and anybody who would not act well in order to panel his dining-room will never be an actor – never, certainly, a man. I have received an invitation to inspect this panelling (now you will perhaps read this article with a little more reverence, Sir or Madam), and I shall certainly accept that invitation, for in Cyril Maude’s home, curled up among the Devonshire hills, within sight and sound of the Devon sea, there are some, if not all, of those attractions so melodiously indicated by Mr. Herman Löhr in his ‘Little Grey Home in the West.’ It dates me to admit knowledge of this classic, but I cannot help that.

‘Mr. Maude,’ the gossip-writer might continue, ‘is a keen fisherman and a first-class shot. He is never happier,’ etc. Then, Mr. Gossip-Writer, you are a liar. Mr. Maude may be a keen fisherman, but he is a rotten shot. If you listened carefully to his lines in *The Wicked Earl*, you would have noticed a brief aside in,

I think, the second act, in which Mr. Maude said, with a perceptible chuckle, 'All my birds are runners.' He never said a truer thing. (I am again quoting his own words.) So that if you are celebrity-hunting, and find yourself down Devonshire way and meet a mild-eyed man whose face is vaguely familiar, wandering a little lazily about with a gun, you must not expect to see any prodigies of sportsmanship. But you might, if you claimed his friendship, hear some admirable stories.

I fear that this is telling you little. Well, I can say everything that is most important about Cyril Maude by repeating three words which he casually let fall before me in his dressing-room at His Majesty's Theatre while he was struggling with remarkable agility into a pair of trousers which must have weighed a ton. '*I like people*,' he said. 'I like them. I just can't help it. People are my hobby – the real be-all and end-all of my existence.' Now 'people' is a vague phrase. But as Cyril Maude said it, I knew what he meant. I remembered seeing him, some years ago, at one of those deadly receptions in New York where it is vital to smile for at least three hours, until one's face becomes set into a grin that remains overnight, and to find at least five hundred different answers to that strange and obviously artificial expression, 'I'm pleased to meet you.'

After an hour of that reception I felt highly displeased to meet anybody at all, but Cyril Maude was obviously adoring it. He beamed and he glowed. He was 'all there' – all the time. His eyes sparkled with interest. He scanned each face as it flashed before him,

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

and I had the impression of a keen connoisseur who was walking down a long gallery of pictures which he particularly desired to study. He seemed to be examining the technique which had moulded the features of the particular individual to whom he was talking at the time, to be weighing up the influences which had gone towards shaping their expressions, to be valuing the tones of their colour. He was not acting. Oh, no. An hour of it had been enough to change my polite smile into a fierce and anguished smirk. His, even into the small hours of the morning, was a genuine welcome.

'I like people.' I wish that I liked them as much as he does. For never can he be bored. He will be sixty-six at his next birthday, and he is the least bored man that I have ever met. Put him next to the club bore and he will extract something from him. Set him talking to the coloured conductor as his sleeping-car speeds out to the Middle West, and he will pick up some fragments of an enlightening philosophy. Introduce him, even, to another actor, and his eyes will open wide with interest, and he will prepare himself to listen. The best listener, Mr. Maude, that ever was, as I have learned on more than one occasion.

And so, are you surprised to learn that, if he had not been an actor, he would have liked to keep an inn? Had I no authority for making that statement, I yet might have suggested it, for he has, in superabundance, the qualities of the first-rate innkeeper — the tact, the cheeriness, the absorption in his fellow-men. But I have authority. Here are his words:

'I feel that I should make a fine innkeeper, growing

in the garden the best blooms for miles around (instead of merely weeding, as I now do), and after the day's shoot, big fires in the inn parlour for every one, and our trophies round the walls. Yes, I should like to keep that inn – the great and only hostelry of a whole hearty sportsman's country-side.'

Perhaps one day he may keep it. But, if he does, I shall not advertise it in these pages. I shall trust that it will be a tiny inn, tucked away in the Devonshire hills, where, in the manner of Mr. Belloc, I may drink brown ale until the moon is high in the heavens. The only blot, however, on that picture is the fact that I detest ale, brown or any other colour.



## XLII

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

or

Dark and Difficult

My manuscript is covered with blots and erasures. This about Maugham, that about Maugham – crossed out, written in again, crossed out once more. I began with his face, which refused to come to life, in spite of a moving description of the way in which his eyes remain unsmiling, even when the rest of his features are twisted by laughter. I turned aside to describe his new villa in the South of France; but since I have seen only a rather dusty snapshot of it on his mantel-piece, I had to give that up, too. (However, I can give you the choice snippet that he intends to see if *truite au bleu* will propagate themselves in his water-garden.) I then wrote of his almost brutal honesty, in art and in life – an honesty which has given to his literary style the bleak beauty of utter simplicity, and to his life an air of mystery, since no right-thinking Englishman can believe that any man is ever so frank unless he has a great deal to conceal.

All these avenues of approach seemed to lead nowhere. Why? Because, not twelve hours ago, Maugham informed me that I ‘sometimes wrote carelessly.’ Considering the searing words which I have heard him utter about other writers, I suppose that one should not

be depressed by so mild a comment. But you must admit that it has a cramping effect upon one's style, even when accompanied by other and more inspiring remarks. Maugham's eyes seem to be upon me, and they are extraordinary eyes — 'long-distance' eyes, I might call them.

You must understand how high is the standard which as an artist he sets himself. It would probably surprise many readers — who only think of him as the successful dramatist, remembering *Rain*, which he never wrote, and forgetting *Of Human Bondage*, which is his masterpiece — to learn that he is still reading Swift and Addison and Newman (especially Newman), in order to learn how English should be written. When he told me that, I wished that I had been wearing a hat, because I should have experienced exquisite pleasure in taking it off. If you aren't a writer, and if you don't know the ins and outs of the commerce of literature, you will not understand my emotion. Let me explain it.

Here is a man who is passionately alive, keenly conscious that he will not live for ever, far more avid of sensation than his sleepy manner might suggest. At the risk of appearing vulgar, I must add that he is 'a man of property.' The royalties from *Rain* and *Our Betters* alone would probably have sent me scampering off to the ends of the earth, to return a nervous wreck and a source of embarrassment to my relatives. And yet he sits down, day after day, to read these essays, simply because he has a reverence for *words*, since they are the only medium through which he can express the beauty of which his strange brain is so poignantly conscious.

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

That simple action would, for me at least, make up for whatever multitude of sins he may or may not have committed. And, I pray you, when you next read that 'Mr. Somerset Maugham, the famous dramatist, is installing fourteen lapis-lazuli bath-rooms in his new villa at Tahiti,' remember that in one of those bath-rooms he may be pacing up and down, reading Swift, and copying – yes, copying – with pen and ink long passages from that volatile creature's works, like some schoolboy who has been set an imposition.

Now do you begin to see my embarrassment? To write something which he may read, knowing that one is to be judged by the standards of Swift and Newman – it is a horrible sensation. Besides, there is a temperamental difference between us, so that I feel at a disadvantage on those occasions when I am privileged to enjoy his companionship. I scatter the room with wild and highly-coloured remarks, and he takes all the dye out of them with the cold water of his particular truth. I wish I could remember a dialogue which took place the other day between us, on the stimulating theme of rows. To adopt Lady Oxford's methods, it began like this:

MYSELF. Haven't you ever had the most shattering rows with people?

MAUGHAM. I don't think so. I don't like rows. (*Looking at me dispassionately.*) I think *you* do.

MYSELF (*with indignation*). I don't. And, anyway, I feel sure you must sometimes have ended great friendships in a blaze of fury.

MAUGHAM (*sleepily*). Not fury. It's usually been because I was bored.

I broke off there to retrace my steps, and eliminate, probably unsuccessfully, any 'carelessness' of which I may have been guilty in this essay. Re-reading the last passage, I seem to have made him into a ruthless, inhuman creature. That is not quite right. He has pity in him. I could tell of furtive charities, sly benevolences. But in matters of art he is ruthless. He refuses to be duped. In the almost antiseptic cleanliness of his prose no germ of sentimentality can dwell. I believe, indeed, that he would applaud, at least in theory, the philosophy of his own character, Charles Strickland. I copy it from the book:

'You hear of men painting pot-boilers to keep an aged mother – well, it shows that they are excellent sons, but it's no excuse for bad work. They're only tradesmen. An artist would let his mother go to the workhouse. There's a writer I know over here who told me that his wife died in childbirth. He was in love with her, and he was mad with grief, but as he sat at the bedside watching her die, he found himself making mental notes of how she looked and what she said, and the things he was feeling.'

And that is really all I can say, unless I begin on a theme which would demand the work of a life. There are numberless things that I have not said, and the only way in which I can say a few of them is to throw them into a sort of stock-pot. Here goes:

'I don't see why one shouldn't love flippantly.' A remark he made once at Wembley, of all places – a remark which has had less effect upon my life than I

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

should wish. 'Absinthe is the heart of a good cocktail' – no, surely that is wrong? But he does make an admirable cocktail, and he does put absinthe into it. 'I try to get down to the bare bones of style.' That, I think, explains itself. Another remark occurs to me about dressing-gowns, indicating a faint regret that only in these garments could man, the superior animal, express his love of colour. 'You should write all that down. One forgets terribly easily.' He told me that, I remember, after I had talked, at considerable length, about a remarkable woman whom I had known very well indeed. That shows him in another light: the keen observer – hardly 'a chiel taking notes,' but still, taking notes. 'You are very wise, because you are living intensely all the time.' That takes something of the sting out of the accusation of carelessness.

It makes me happy to reflect that, in spite of his passion for the visible world, nobody could say of Maugham, as they said of another, that 'he has put his genius into his life, and only his talent into his works.'

## XLIII

MELBA

*or*

Never Again

SOMEbody who does not usually rhapsodize wrote to me yesterday saying: 'It's a boy's voice. It has a timbre which seems to have risen, like a star, above sex, above passion, above the strife of years, into a realm of pure beauty.'

He, like I, had been at Covent Garden when Melba bade farewell to the stage over which she has reigned for so many years. I did not see her on that wonderful night. I am ill at ease among masses of bouquets and grease-paint, and attendant worshippers. Besides, one was so *émotionné* that the cool air of the streets seemed infinitely welcome. But the next morning I saw her. She had been at a party till three o'clock, had risen at eight, and was dancing about the house as though she had slept for twelve hours. I told her what her unknown lover — please let me use that beautiful word, for who may not be allowed to fall in love with a voice? — had said.

'Ah, that's the Melba method! I've never swerved once from my principles. And I think I can be proud of the result. Can't I?'

I wonder if you can quite understand all that is implied in the Melba method, and, which is

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

more, the tenacity with which Melba has adhered to it.

The Melba method began as soon as she was old enough to go out into the harsh Australian sunshine and play in the shadow of the gum-trees. For she was always humming – one of the finest vocal exercises yet discovered. She once said to me, 'My mother used to beg me to stop my humming. It used to get on her nerves. Every tune that I ever heard I would hum; and, since my opportunities for hearing music were exceedingly limited, I can imagine that my efforts must have been pretty monotonous.'

The next stage in the Melba method arrived when she spent that vital nine months in Paris under the tutelage of Mathilde Marchesi. Melba has herself paid public tribute to this great teacher. But one is inclined to under-estimate the pupil's fidelity to the Marchesi ideal. Marchesi's system was one of classical simplicity, a system which went straight to nature and regarded any 'forcing' as anathema. When Melba first made her dazzling success at Brussels in 'Rigoletto' she had every temptation to swerve from her ideals. As she herself said, 'They all came, singers, teachers, friends, enemies, and tried to make me sing as they sang. They tried to make me force my top notes, to do "stunts," to sing rôles which were unsuitable for me. I always refused. I always remembered Marchesi. Well – it has paid, hasn't it?'

The echoes of that 'boy's' voice at Covent Garden the other day are her best answer.

The other vital principle of the Melba method, which

I should like to see permanently printed on the door-mat of every singing teacher in this country, has been a consistent respect for the composer. I have seen copies of songs used by other singers scored all over with alterations. I have seen phrasing hacked to pieces, diminuendos turned into crescendos, middle 'C's' thrust breathlessly into the upper register. Melba has never done that. Her score of 'Bohème' has a few notes in pencil by Puccini himself. Apart from that it remains a score of 'Bohème.' She told me once, 'I was so proud when Puccini said to me, "You sing *my* music. You don't sing Melba-Puccini."'

That has been always the standard rule of her life, and I like to think that it has also become the rule of some of those with whom she has come in contact. Many times have I sat by her at an opera or a concert, and seen her face contorted with agony as a young singer forces her top notes. She almost growls with indignation – not at the singer, but at the teacher who is responsible for a ruined voice. And often she has gone round afterwards to the singer's dressing-room with a few words of advice.

Those words of advice have sometimes developed into a singing lesson. Nobody who has seen Melba giving a singing lesson will ever forget it. In Australia there was a little Italian soprano with a charming lyric quality in her voice who was making the night hideous by bellowing her top notes. Melba took her in hand, and spent many afternoons at the piano making that girl sing softly. 'Piano! Piano! *Pianissimo!* Softer still. Ten times more softly. Fifty times more softly.



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

If you go on singing like this you'll have no voice at all in five years.' That same little Italian singer – who seemed, when I first heard her, to be galloping down the road to ruin – has now had some of the best criticisms of any of the singers at Covent Garden this season.

There – that is the trouble about so hurried a portrait – one can only sketch a single fleeting mood. Melba is wonderful 'copy,' wherever she is. To see her groping about in old furniture shops with an uncanny instinct for a bargain; to see her in ecstasies over the art of Yvonne Printemps; to see her making confusion worse confounded by a sudden spasm of weeding in her garden – these things and many more I might have told. Out of pure selfishness I shall ignore them, to record an entirely personal impression.

Melba's voice, so often described as golden, has never been golden to me. It has been silver – a metal of far greater loveliness. It has the coolness of silver, and its sparkle. It is at once brilliant and chaste.

Always shall I carry with me the memory of a Venetian morning when, of the many, many times that I have heard her sing, she seemed to sing most beautifully. That fine American pianist, George Copeland, had come over from the Lido to our hotel in order to play over some songs which she was going to give at a concert the next day. The rehearsal was in a great room that looked out on to the Grand Canal. Sunlight was flooding the room, and through the open window came the lap, lap of water on the steps and the unforgettable sound – which bears with it all the deathless

magic of Venice – of gondolas straining against the wooden piles.

He began to play. She sang. As she sang, she walked round the room, now in sunshine, now in shadow, her voice rising and falling in cadences of unearthly beauty. Something of the languor of Venice seemed to be echoing in those tones – something that was neither old nor young, but beyond time. Song followed song, and always there was the lapping of the water and the dappled sunlight as a hidden chorus to her plaint. The last song, I remember, was that exquisite thing by Chausson:

Le temps des lilas  
Et le temps des roses  
Ne reviendra plus . . .

That is what I feel about Melba's voice. Never again shall we know a fragrance such as she has given us.

## XLIV

FLORENCE MILLS

*or*

A Lonely Blackbird

THE first thing I remember about her is her voice. 'Silver' is a hackneyed word to use about voices, but hers is distinctly silvery. And its quality seems all the pleasanter in contrast to the quaint body from which it emerges. She sings gravely – one might almost say sedately – high silver notes, like beams of light, floating into the dark auditorium.

Do you remember the part where she sings 'tooty-tooty-too'? It sounds ridiculous, but I cannot think of any other way of describing it. It occurs in a number called *Baby and Me*, where, as a sort of coloured Vesta Tilley, she prances across the stage with two 'babies' on either side. During the chorus to this song she sings an obbligato, high and clear, to the words 'tooty-tooty-too.' It is like one of those flute obbligati in which Donizetti so delighted in the florid period of *Lucia*. You cannot forget it if you have heard it, because it is a childishly spontaneous form of art which is different from anything one has heard before.

She told me how the idea originated – and in the telling of it she seemed to throw open a door into some strange, dark house, of which one has dreamed but never visited.

'In the old days, you see,' she said, 'my mother would sing negro spirituals. She sang them during times of storm and thunder and lightning, and I can still see her, rocking backwards and forwards, crooning to herself, while I hid, frightened to death, behind the door, waiting for the storm to be past. She sang those songs, not because she thought that she was frightening away evil spirits, or anything like that, but simply because they seemed the right thing to sing when the whole world was in the grip of the storm. Then, later on, when I went down South in a show, I remembered those old songs. I was doing a number with another girl, and I began to croon, in just the way that my mother used to do. . . .'

I was glad to hear that explanation. I should not have liked to think that something which had moved me out of all proportion to its apparent significance was merely an obvious music-hall 'stunt.' There is, to me, a hidden rhythm in the art of all coloured people – a super-syncopation behind their melodies, a strange stirring life even in their quietest gestures, a quality even in their broadest smiles, which seems to hint at a melancholy not yet quite forgotten. And especially do I feel this with Florence Mills.

She is full of surprises. Who would believe, for instance, that only the other day she paid her first visit to the country? I am glad to think that it was the English country on which those intelligent eyes first rested, and that for once in a way it was possible to see that country-side without its usual blanket of fog and wet. Yet, think of it! Never to have been out of a city,

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

except in a Pullman car, until one was a star! And, needless to say, her first sight of the country made an impression on her that she will never forget.

'When it was night,' she said, 'we went for a walk. There was a full moon — oh, the brightest moon you've ever seen! Brighter than that lamp outside' — and a dusky hand indicated the street lamp that one could see glimmering through the curtains.

'Everything was very limpid and very still. I could feel the quietness of it all entering right into me. And I had an extraordinary instinct that I'd been there before — long ago — that it had all happened, 'way back, in the distance.

'At night I couldn't sleep. I had to keep jumping out of bed and looking out on to the country, and listening . . . to nothing . . . and looking up at the moon.'

That seems to me a rather pathetic picture. The little dark figure — a 'foreigner' in a far deeper sense than we can ever be foreigners — looking out on to the first country she has ever seen, under the moonlight which is common to us all. Many memories may have drifted through her head as she stood there. The memory of those days when, at the age of four, she was a piccaninny on the stage at Washington. 'The silliest, smallest thing I was.' Memories of Harlem, the coloured quarter of New York, with its cabarets, its unique civilization, its brilliant lights . . . memories of her first revue, her sudden success, her conquest of an entirely new world. . . . But perhaps all this is only my romancing.

I asked her if she had read a certain famous American novel, in which for the first time Harlem was revealed to the world in all its strangeness. Yes, she had read it. No, she did not like it.

'They're so weak,' she said. 'All the coloured people in that book crumple up when they're put to the test. They've no stamina – nothing. We're not like that,' she said. 'We're not.'

Her dark eyes kindled, opened wide, showed a slumbering fire. 'Do you know what all this does for us?'

'All what?'

'The – the attitude of the people who aren't coloured?'

I shook my head.

*'It makes us fight – fight all the harder – till we come out top. That's what it does.'*

'But I thought things were so much better . . . so much easier for all of you.'

'For some of us – yes. But down South –'

'Yes?' (This conversation sounds broken, but how could it be otherwise?)

'Down South it's still terrible. There isn't slavery any more – not real slavery – but there's something very like it.'

She shut her eyes quickly. A line of black lashes over a delicate, coffee skin. Then she looked up, and again, even through the smile, I had a sense of 'melancholy not quite forgotten.' Which sounds very 'bla,' but is none the less true.

'But it's all going to be better,' she said. 'It's all

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

going to be much better. When you think of how things were sixty, forty – why, even twenty years ago, you can see the difference at once. It isn't only that we've got societies for our people down in the South. It isn't only that we've shown that we can make money as well as anybody else, that we're creative, that we're capable of doing great things in art . . . the whole spirit's altering.'

And that was all she said about it, and all she said about herself. There was no bitterness, no resentment, only pluck and a smile in the face of heavy odds. Perhaps she will one day show the world how fine her art might be if it were given a chance to expand.

A novelist might find a great theme in the study of a woman like this. Here she is – a woman with a mind so sensitive that it responds to even the suggestion of emotion, a sense of humour more delicate than that of many a European, and yet – well, you know what I mean.

And the question I want to ask is, 'Should there always be this "difference"? Should there be even the suggestion of something a little – "unusual"?'

You know me well enough to be able to guess my answer. I wish I knew you well enough to be able to guess yours.

## XLV

GEORGE MOORE

*or*

The Cause of all the Trouble

IN spite of his pink cheeks, his bright eyes, and his exquisitely agile conversation, I felt that I was talking to a legend personified. And in spite of the fresh flowers, the opened books, and the comforting glow of firelight, the room seemed as though it had been carefully preserved from a past age. I had, indeed, that curious sense of looking on to the present from the future, a sense similar to that which oppresses one in the home of George Washington at Mount Vernon, where even the smallest details of the study – the pens, the slips of paper, the footstools, the tobacco-jar – are still as he left them.

‘Here,’ I thought, ‘will come future tourists. They will go over to that portrait which shows him with orange hair and head aslant, and they will wonder if he looked like that. They will pick up his books, noting the many faded corrections, quoting proudly from alternative versions of his works. They will prod the chair in which he now sits, asking themselves if it was from its depths that he first set out on his enchanted journey with Héloïse and Abélard. They will stare through the window on to Ebury Street, and picture him walking slowly into the distance, some



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

Sunday afternoon, on his way to tea with Edmund Gosse.'

Do not, pray, imagine that I am willing Mr. George Moore to a premature decease, nor that I am hinting that he should leave his possessions to the nation. Do not, above all, imagine me to be suggesting that he himself is a museum piece, to be deposited with however much reverence on however exalted a shelf. Five minutes of his conversation disproves that. I am merely recording the fact that I found it impossible to sit with George Moore in Ebury Street without feeling a surge of associations so compelling that I seemed to be myself a figure in some ancient story, as though I were listening to Tennyson reading 'Maud' or watching Dickens pulling his faces in the glass.

The subject which he was discussing did not lessen this impression. He talks much as he writes, with the same musical cadences, using words cleanly and economically. Sometimes there are delicious phrases — as when he remarked that a certain famous author of our times had 'flown round the world on the wings of vulgarity.' Sometimes an agreeable flippancy, such as, 'Never write about rich people. If a woman has ten thousand a year, the only question worth asking about her is how many lovers she has.' Sometimes a passage of sheer beauty, echoing and dying away, leaving me with an aching regret that I am no shorthand writer and have no Boswellian qualities. For the sake of both our reputations, I will not attempt to transcribe them.

There is, however, real interest in the matter of which he talked, even if I am unable to indicate the

manner. 'The conditions of the world to-day,' he said, 'seem to me to offer no sort of inspiration to the writer. So many beautiful things have gone for ever. The horse has gone, and even from the lowest point of view a hansom-cab was more inspiring than a taxi. The sword has gone, and all that the sword implied. There are no more private wars. No doubt, private wars were very unpleasant and uncomfortable, but they were excellent material for literature.'

I listened. 'Conversations in Ebury Street,' I thought. Edmund Gosse should be over by the window. And Freeman. Possibly he may begin to pulverize Hardy.

... Then he continued: 'The village has gone. There are no occupations. Everything is standardized and centralized. I can remember, in one of the houses of the village where I was born, a beautiful mahogany clock. That clock was made by the village carpenter. What village carpenter could make a clock to-day? And in the adjoining village they brewed the beer which we all drank in that locality. To-day the beer is brewed in Dublin. Those are only two random instances of a universal tendency.'

'What is the result? I am forced back to the past. I go to the Middle Ages for Héloïse and Abélard. I go to the beginning of our era for *The Brook Kerith*. *Esther Waters*, of course, was modern, but that was one of the few occasions when I felt that the poignancy of the story would be heightened by a modern setting.'

I wonder if he is right. Is it impossible to find some significant melody in the broken rhythms of modern

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

life? One has only to ask the question to perceive that it is too immense to discuss here. It is enough to us that he has created, and is still creating the most beautiful prose that we have known since Shelley.

He told me something of the secrets of his technique. 'Whatever else people may say about my stories,' he said, 'they cannot deny that the endings are good. I have always the end in view. I do not read many modern novels, but in those which come my way I am constantly noting that the author does not end a story so much as leave it off. He merely ceases to write, leaving the characters still to work out their destinies, the issues to determine themselves. I could not possibly write a story in that manner. If I did not know how my story was going to end, I could not write it at all. Often, while I have been writing, and have felt weary, or uncertain as to how it was going to turn out, I have been buoyed up and encouraged simply by the thought of the ending.

'I hear strange stories about my methods of writing. I am told, for instance, that some of my books have been entirely dictated. That is not so. I may dictate a story, of course, after it has for a long time been working in my mind, but I only do so in order to obtain a rough outline of it. No. Even that is not true. I dictate it in order that I may not be entirely idle. Were I to sit in this room alone, I might well be wondering if I should have sufficient energy to write for half an hour after tea. The presence of another person spurs me on. But I never publish a dictated word. I may dictate a second time from the first draft, but after-

wards I write and re-write over and over again until I am satisfied. And even then I make extensive alterations on my proofs. The proof corrections on one of my books alone cost me a hundred and twenty pounds.'

That in itself had a touch of a vanished age. To-day, when some of our most distinguished literary critics openly boast that they do not bother to read their proofs, it is a little refreshing to learn of a man who is so conscientious an artist that he sacrifices a large portion of his royalties in order to make his work perfect. I beg Mr. Moore's pardon. To describe him only as a 'conscientious artist' is a little insulting. We have already made him a classic, and posterity will underline our verdict.

As I went away, passed through the hall, stood on the doorstep, the sense of emerging from a museum again came strongly over me. I endeavoured to combat it. I said, 'This is 121, Ebury Street, isn't it?' He beamed his affirmative. 'Noel Coward is almost a neighbour of yours, then. He lives at 111.'

George Moore beamed again. 'Ebury Street will soon be quite celebrated,' he said. 'What is the time?'

I told him that it was nearly four o'clock.

'Then I must say good-bye. I-am-going-to-tea-with-Edmund-Gosse.'

It was the perfect 'curtain.' The doors of the museum closed. But as I paused at the end of the street to look back upon the museum, I knew that within its walls would still be fashioned works which the tourists of the future may thumb with the most reverence.

## XLVI

BEVERLEY NICHOLS

or

—What?

I AM supposed to be a very modern young man. At the same time, I have just been seriously informed, by Baroness Clifton, writing with girlish ardour in the *Sunday Express*, that I deserve to be (a) eaten by lions; (b) raked into the gutter; (c) hacked with a pike until my blood spattered the pavement. So if I *am* a very modern young man, in any way typical of my period, the outlook for the British Empire is indeed black.

Yet I believe there are a good many young men knocking about the streets, clubs, and offices of London who think and act along the same lines as myself, even if they are not rash enough to commit their thoughts to paper. Therefore, as a true citizen, it seems necessary to reveal those thoughts and actions, in order that some league or other may take suitable steps to combat our influence.

What am I? A million things. I am a dramatic critic. I play Debussy. At school I had the rather ridiculous reputation of being an athlete. I have written a book or two. I sailed round the world. I have brown hair. I like tramping through woods in the rain. I can swim, not too badly. The scent of lilac drives me to wild indiscretions. But all these things are

like the dreary *questionnaires* which are printed about popular actors. They do not tell you about *me* – or rather, about the aspect of me which I believe to be typical of this fevered generation.

Therefore I would be bold, and say that the key to my outlook, and to that of so many of my contemporaries, is that I have *seen through things*, and have been honest enough to admit it. It is an ungraceful, inelegant phrase, and one, too, which has about it the staleness of much youthful cynicism. But I try to express a quality as divergent from the rationalism of the eighteenth century as from the amaciated disillusion of the 'nineties. It is a perfectly cheerful emotion, a happy agnosticism, in no way unpoetical, the sort of emotion which enables one to love the moon without believing it to be peopled by fairies. '*Seen through things*.' Yes. And it is the only phrase which expressed the feeling that, in spite of incredulity, there is something left – a haunting glimpse of beauty waywardly captured, a blossom or two still unfaded.

Let us see what tabulation will do. Take the word 'Faith.' Faith is a musty, lisping word to me. I am always being told that if I have faith – whether it is in God, in the Government, in the Empire, in myself – I shall be saved.

I do not know from what I shall be saved, nor has anybody satisfactorily enlightened me, but there it is. And the people who say these things regard their own faith as a virtue. It is no more a virtue than measles or an ear for music. You either have it or you don't. I have faith only in a few human relationships, and in my

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

own capacity for appreciating beautiful things. My lack of faith in other things is neither clever nor stupid. It is merely unfortunate.

I believe that when I die I am snuffed out like a candle, and that no god will ever again set me alight. I see no use in trying to cheat myself. I long to believe in an after-life; I long to think that the shadows which even now are slowly lengthening over the lawns of life will, when the night comes, be chased away by some as yet unrisen moon. But I cannot. All my searching, my questioning, my endeavour, lead me nowhere.

You may call that a tragedy. You may say: 'If you, and the rest of your generation, feel that the world is futile, you have no part in it. You will not fight its battles nor sing its songs. You only stand aside, mocking or deploring, according to your temperament.'

That argument is quite wrong. The fact that I do not believe in a cause does not prevent me from dying for it. (Do you think that all the young men who died in the war believed a quarter of the poisonous, but necessary, nonsense that was preached by the politicians?) Though the road leads nowhere, one marches on. What else is there to do? Besides, there are so many bright sights to be seen and brave sallies to be made *en route*.

Futility, you see, can be great fun. Even at one's University one realized that. I remember in my first spring at Oxford, walking down the crocus-fringed paths of Magdalen with a friend, and discussing the regeneration of English politics. Nothing very new in that, you will say. I agree.

What *was* new and what *was* significant in that walk was our open admission, in a sudden moment of frankness, that the whole thing was meaningless. We meant to do it because it would have been intensely amusing, but we could not believe that we should thereby greatly benefit mankind.

Did the young worshippers of Gladstone or Disraeli have such qualms? I doubt it. But make no mistake — half of the young followers of Mr. Baldwin, or my Lord of Oxford, or Mr. Ramsay Macdonald, have not nearly such pleasant illusions about their public heroes as you may imagine.

That is why at Oxford, during my brief term at the Union, I took more trouble to make debates amusing than instructive, witty than weighty. A Union debate for the purposes of getting anything done is about as futile as a debate in the House of Commons. But it is infinitely more brilliant and more decorative. So I encouraged the epigrammatists, and I made my officers wear white carnations. If I had been able to afford an orchestra, I should have had a band to play slow music during 'private business.' As a result, we were called flippant — we *were* flippant. And my definition of flippancy is 'a brave gesture by one who has seen through life.'

Pose — pose — it all comes down to that. I am posing all my life. So are you. Why not admit it? And as one poses, so, to a certain extent, one becomes. That is why it seems to me so foolish to adopt, as do the great majority of the English people, a pose of stupidity. If one tells the average Englishman that he has said some-



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

thing brilliant, he blushes and looks as guilty as if you had told him that he had stepped in 'something.' If anybody told me that I had said something brilliant (which has not yet occurred), I should say, 'Of course. But it is far more brilliant than you imagine.' It is really a form of autosuggestion. If I wish to learn a piece of music, I say to myself, 'I am going to play this César Franck Prelude magnificently.' I say the same thing to my friends, in a firm and cheerful voice. Thus a standard is set up, and in the watches of the night I practise and practise, spending a whole evening on six bars. In the end I play it – not magnificently, but far better than I should have played it had I swayed about the room and said: 'Oh, no; I don't really play, you know – just strum a little.'

I hate public modesty. In my heart of hearts I know – oh, how bitterly I know! – my weaknesses, my stupidities, my vices. But I am not going to parade them before *you*. I am not going to shout to the world: 'Here am I – a beggar, a poor crazy thing, scratching for a few crumbs at your banquet.' No. I have another figure to show you. And the more boldly do I make that figure strut upon the stage, the more brilliantly do I light it up, the more do I, the spectator of my own tragi-comedy, endeavour to emulate this creature of dreams and shadows.

And there, before I have even begun, I must stop. Not a word about my favourite theatre, nor even a hint as to my favourite colour, nor my opinion of the modern girl. It is a sad record, I fear, and, glancing back over these scattered thoughts, it seems that I have made

myself into a mixture of Dostoevsky, Charles B. Cochran, and Noel Coward. But then, you cannot imagine the difficulty of describing yourself, unless you have tried it.

Had there been sunshine outside my window, and early lilac, I might have painted myself an incurable optimist, with a belief in pound sterling and the virtuous life. Had a band marched down the street I might have proved a fierce Imperialist, and told you of my first toy soldiers. Had the moon been shining, I might have acted the great lover, and hinted at dark passions in scented gardens. But there are none of these things — only a muggy morning and a drizzle of rain. As a result, I have turned myself into a comfortable agnostic. Well, there are worse moods.

## XLVII

DR. CYRIL NORWOOD

*or*

Humanizing Harrow

WHEN Dr. Cyril Norwood left Marlborough for Harrow – in a praiseworthy endeavour to bring education to the masses – he left behind him a school which was unique in England. Of course, in a sense, Marlborough has always been unique. As every good Marlburian knows:

Though all the world through you shall tramp,  
You will not match the green  
Of Savernake and Barb'ry Camp  
And all that lies between.

But though the very word 'Marlborough' brings a surge of memories for me – the tinkle of sheep-bells on hills that keep eternal tryst with the wind, the yellow forest-shadows of spring, the ragged scurry of rooks across a winter sky as one ran into chapel – it is not of these that I would write. These were there long before he came. They will still be there, one presumes, long after he has gone. And his memory may well live with them.

That memory will be one of a man with great courage. Most of us do not realize how treacherous is the position of a new head master who possesses ideas.

He has to move through a fog of convention. He has against him the armed forces of sentimentality and laziness. He is the loneliest figure in the world. So, at least, he struck me when I first saw him, one winter's day ten years ago. Several of us were flying across the court in a vain endeavour to reach the sixth form before the bell stopped. Somebody shouted out: 'The Yellow Peril's come!' I looked round, and saw a tall man standing by himself under the trees, looking up to the sky. His arms were folded, and he seemed to be smiling. In that brief picture you really have the chief characteristics of Norwood – his loneliness, his courage, and his humour.

'The Yellow Peril' nickname was quickly dropped, because he soon proved himself to be neither yellow nor perilous. But slowly things began to change. The extent to which they changed may best be described by a remark which a housemaster at Marlborough made to me the other day. 'After a time,' he said, 'we found that we were doing far less work and gaining far more knowledge than we had ever dared to hope.'

That was only made possible because Norwood had an ideal – an ideal which he described to me as 'giving the average boy a greater opportunity to distinguish himself.' The 'average' boy has had a hard time of it in the English public schools. Because he is not brilliant at either games or work, he is ignored. He is not usually given credit for any originality, because few people have ever bothered to find out if he possesses any. Norwood was one of those few. In fact, I do not think it unduly high-falutin to describe him as the first

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

head master who realized that schoolboys have souls as well as bodies, and that a schoolboy's soul is not, of necessity, nearly so dull or so dirty as we are led to believe.

That explains so many of his Marlborough reforms – reforms which he is repeating in Harrow. It explains his insistence that every boy shall have at least some time to do the thing he wants to do, even if he only wants to pick buttercups (a very exhausting but very moral pursuit), or read newspapers. It explains, too, the fact that he has constantly regarded education as a part of modern life, rather than as a complicated series of ancient rites to be performed behind high walls, far from the suggestion of competitive existence. I asked him about these famous reforms.

‘Well, for one thing,’ he said, ‘I made geography alternative to Latin.’

‘You did *what*?’ (Memories of certain ferocious Latinists prompted my outburst.)

‘I made geography alternative to Latin.’ He smiled. ‘That caused a bit of a sensation. But I believe I was right. You see, I was thinking of the boys who go abroad. They usually set off to remote parts of the Empire without even enough knowledge of the place to enable them to buy a proper kit. We altered that. We treated geography not only from the geological and topographical angles, but from the humanistic angle as well – teaching boys the influence of climate upon character, the proper importance of race, etc.

‘Then, again, I introduced compulsory German. I found that under the voluntary system the number of

scholars taking German was reduced to two. That,' he added softly, 'seemed rather inadequate in view of the prolific tendencies of the German people. I was criticized, of course, in many quarters. I was lectured with the old argument that Greek provided the only first-rate mental exercise. But it seemed to me that German also provided a first-rate mental exercise, and possessed the additional advantage that it could be turned to some immediate practical use.

'As for games . . .' He paused. 'Of course, that's a problem. One has individual cases of boys whose lives were made miserable because they were bad at games; but one can't do without them. They're a tremendous safeguard. Nearly all of the few tragic cases I had at Marlborough were concerned with boys who for some reason or other had been excused games.'

'It's the mental attitude, the deification of games, which is so abominable,' I said. I told him of an experience that once befell me after I had obtained leave from scrum practice. The leave was given me by a master who had found, through bitter experience, that my function on such occasions was purely decorative. As I ran off, beaming with joy, to the music-rooms, somebody shouted out contemptuously: 'Look at you! You'd rather play the piano than football!' I paused. My heart almost stopped beating. I turned round and passionately denied the accusation. I wonder a cock didn't crow.

'Nothing that you can ever do will entirely alter that attitude,' said Norwood. 'But the tyranny of games is less violent than it was. In the old days it pursued one

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

even to Oxford. I remember that when I first went up there were only five out of thirty freshmen at St. John's who ever dared to talk about anything but games "shop." And those five were regarded as exceedingly queer – as though they were, if not immoral, at least a little weak in the head. I understand that nowadays at the Universities the positions are reversed, and that people consider it necessary to adopt a disguise when setting off to play football. I think the function of a head master is simply to make people realize that there are other things in the world. It doesn't sound startling, but it isn't always easy.'

We talked of many other things – things which I cannot indicate. But at the end I asked him a question which I probably should not have asked.

'Don't you sometimes despair?'

He looked at me quickly. 'What do you mean?'

'Don't you feel that it may all be transient? That boys come, and go, and forget? That the very medium you work in is so fluid that you can never see whether you have succeeded or not? After all, the man who writes a book or paints a picture – he can see his work – touch it. . . . But you . . .'

He thought for a minute. 'One does get that feeling sometimes. The other day I went down to Marlborough to preach. It was the first time that I had gone since I left. As I stood up and looked round the chapel where I had spent so many wonderful hours I suddenly realized that already there were nearly two hundred boys who had never known me. And soon there will be none. . . .

'But one *can* see the results sometimes. In boys who have realized one's point of view, boys who seem to wish to continue along the road where one had tried to guide them. Before I left Bristol for Marlborough I was beginning to see my hopes being fulfilled in individual cases. Then the war came. And all the work into which I had put my heart was buried in Flanders.'

Recalling this conversation makes me feel almost morbid. Still, one can comfort oneself with the thought that all work of every sort is, sooner or later, buried, somewhere or other. And Flanders seems as good a place as anywhere else.



## XLVIII

SEAN O'CASEY

*or*

A Rough Diamond

HE had on a new sky-blue overcoat, and as he took it off, flinging it over the back of his chair, I observed a lining fiercely decorated with red squares. Upon this coat he proceeded to lay his cap, which was of a lighter shade of blue. He then sat down, and buried his face in his hands.

I had lured him to a tea-shop. He had a distinct distaste for more exalted places. The tea-shop was filled with a smell of steam and stale rock-cakes. The waitresses raced about, carrying the rock-cakes to pale young men and girls who were seated around us. I have never known a more noisy place. The roar of traffic (which ever and anon increased to deafening point as the door swung open to admit more pale young men), the clattering of tea-cups, the low, moaning conversation of the customers.

Yet it was in such a place that a spell was woven over me by Sean O'Casey, with the weak eyes, the deep-lined cheeks, and the human mouth. It made me forget the noise, the flash of buses outside the dirty windows, everything, except that I was in the presence of a great man. They brought us muffins, and tea, and

a plate of cakes; such cakes — cakes like dead sea anemones, with frills round them, cakes with decorations of marzipan and stale cream clinging to them like alien growths. O'Casey looked up and took some tea and a muffin.

'Yesterday,' he said, 'was the happiest day I've spent since I came to England. It was in Hyde Park that I spent it, and I stood there listening to the speakers. I felt almost drunk at the end of it — the characters up there are so rich in comedy.

*'What are your dramatists doing to neglect Hyde Park?'* He smacked his fist on the table, and pointed his muffin at me like a limp bludgeon. I regarded it, fascinated, but did not reply. Then he leant back, his head turned slightly to one side, looked at me out of the corner of his eye, and smiled. 'Why, young man, it's the finest field of character you'll ever know. The people I saw there last night. You listen.'

He bent forward again, and spoke almost in a whisper. 'There was a woman there, a fine woman, standing in the lamplight under the trees. Her voice was very clear and sweet, and she didn't care how many times they interrupted her. All the time she spoke she was patting the crucifix by her side — patting it, fondling it . . . like this. . . .

'There was a man there who made a speech about milk. As I stood in the crowd I knew, as soon as he had begun, that he had been making the same speech for years, winter and summer, morning and night. For the people in the front row of the crowd knew it by heart, and began to repeat it with him. He didn't care. He

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

went on – with his chorus. There's a tragedy, and there's a comedy. . . .

'There was a man with a bald head, and little glistening eyes, who spoke of Jesus. There was the light of madness in his eyes, and as I watched him I saw right deep into him, and I knew that he would have killed anybody who refused to be led to Jesus – killed him and thanked his God for the opportunity. . . .

'Then there was a thin man in a black coat, and long grey hair, who kept on taking oranges out of his pocket. He was a vegetarian. There was a man with a mournful voice who spoke of the Lost Tribes. There was every sort of religious mania, dietetic mania, political mania, personal mania. And there it all goes on, night after night, under the trees. But nobody seems to notice it. None of those characters is ever put on to the stage. Why? Tell me why?'

My muffin had now set quite solid, and, on being prodded, felt less obscene than when it first arrived. But I was not really interested in muffins. For opposite me was O'Casey, the ex-slum boy, in 'smart' London. Here he was, with his genius of observation, seeing for the first time the painted ladies, the crimped young men, the poisoned critics, the wilting hectic generation which we have now come to know so well. I was intensely anxious to know how it all struck him. And, in order to find out, I asked him about the work of a very brilliant young English dramatist who has specialized in the portrayal of this particular stratum of society.

'Did you ever see *The Vortex*?' I asked O'Casey.

'No. But I read it.'

'Didn't you think it a fine play?'

'No.' Rather fiercely he put five lumps of sugar into his tea-cup. 'The people in it are absolutely artificial.'

'But they're meant to be artificial. If he'd drawn them in any other way, he'd have been telling lies.'

'Nobody's artificial.' O'Casey looked at me kindly, rather as though I were a child who could not quite understand why  $a \times a = a^2$ .

'Nobody's artificial,' he said. 'Even insects aren't artificial. Shakespeare drew artificial characters, but he gave them humanity. My point about these people is that they haven't got humanity.'

I began to grow almost excited. 'I know they haven't got humanity. They haven't got it on the stage (at least in the first two acts), and they haven't got it in real life. You haven't met them, that's all. I shouldn't think you particularly wanted to. But if you did meet them, you'd realize what I said was true.'

'If I *did* meet them,' he answered, 'I shouldn't listen to them when they talked like that. I should take them home. I may sit next to a woman at lunch who talks to me politely, and says all the right things. Perhaps she says them very cleverly, but her remarks don't interest me. *She* doesn't begin to live till you see her alone, within four walls. Then she drops all her poses, and she tells you her son is going to marry a woman she hates, or that her lover has left her. She shows all her greeds, her vanities (her *true* vanities), she shows you the things you can love about her, and the things you can hate about her. Isn't that more interesting than mere pose?'

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

I was not daunted even yet.

'I believe,' I said, 'that these people would pose just as much alone as at a luncheon party. Their whole life is pose. You may say that you would see through their poses. How could you, if the pose was *them*? As one poses, one becomes.'

'I don't believe any human being is devoid of humanity,' said O'Casey. 'If you do, then you're wrong. There's no such thing as inherent artificiality. That's the trouble about half the dramatists to-day. *They're making life out of drama, instead of making drama out of life.*'

I dropped the point. If there had not been so many crashes going on behind, and if I had not been feeling particularly disillusioned that afternoon, as though I were dwelling in a world of masks, I might have got nearer to an agreement with him. But I still feel he has not yet met these characters which he says are 'artificial,' which, to you and me, are so distressingly real.

## XLIX

SIR WILLIAM ORPEN

*or*

### Tea and Technique

WE stood in front of a Monet which was as bright and sparkling as a Chopin scherzo, with passages in paint that rippled with the same ease and light (though they were composed of multitudinous notes of colour) as a cadenza perfectly executed. Outside, the rain hurled itself against the window so fiercely that one imagined somebody throwing showers of silver at the broad sheet of glass. Serious for a moment, Orpen stood in front of the Monet, explaining something which I had never quite understood before.

'You see that sky?' he said, pointing to the curious streaks of blue, orange, green and purple. 'You realize it's beautiful, in a funny sort of way, but you asked just now if it mightn't be a sort of inspired slap-dash, something with no particular method, no very clear design. I'll tell you why it isn't only that. I've copied that sky six or seven times. I've taken my palette and mixed a green or a purple, or whatever it may be, actually *on* the Monet, wiping it off immediately afterwards while it was still wet, and then copying it on another canvas. Well, if I transpose a single one of these colours – if I put a streak of green where Monet put a streak of orange – the result's a God-forsaken

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

unholy mess. It yells at you that it's all wrong. It's like a ghastly sort of patchwork. But you step away from this picture for a minute, and see what happens.'

I stepped away. The flaring colours seemed to dissolve into a merciful mist. There was nothing more than a quiet radiance. I had imagined that any combination of colours, at a distance, dissolved in a similar fashion. I am grateful to Orpen for opening my eyes.

Orpen, when he can be induced to talk 'art,' is as stimulating as champagne – or should I say pre-war whisky? For his talk is warm and racy, full-flavoured and very human. He stands in front of a picture and says: 'That old chap looks as if he'd had a night out, doesn't he?' And in the next breath he is explaining, with a sort of jerky brilliance, exactly how the artist obtained those lines of dissipation, the secret vices that he has suggested by the mere quality of his paint.

After the Monet he took me over to the superb Sargent which he bought in Bond Street a little while ago. It is as lovely a thing as you have ever seen – the head of a Spanish girl, turned in half-profile: an inspired study in russet and bronze and gold.

'Look at that eye,' said Orpen. 'The off eye. Shove your nose into it. Right up against it. Paint won't come off.'

I shoved my nose as desired. 'The eye isn't there any longer,' I said.

'Of course it isn't,' chuckled Orpen. 'Take your nose away. Right away. Yards away. Now, what about that for an eye?'

I wish that the reader might place his nose in similar

positions. He would then realize what Orpen meant. And if he had heard the tone in which he spoke, as apart from the words he uttered, he would realize the reverence which Orpen held for the master who by some strange alchemy could suggest so infinitely more than, apparently, he actually painted. I said to Orpen: 'That isn't a painting at all. *It's an incantation.*' Had you seen it, you would have agreed.

We crossed over to another side of the studio. The sky outside was darkening rapidly, and my unknown controller of the elements was hurling his silver more and more fiercely against the broad sheet of glass. But the English climate could not dim the glow of a lovely Vignon which hung in front of us. As Orpen spoke of this, he threw, once more, a fresh light on to his own character. It was a very simple picture of a country lane, with two figures in the foreground, some winding paths, some bushes. 'But don't you see,' he cried, 'the skill behind all that? The damned observation? The *truth*? Why – look at the painting of that bit of hedge, with the path underneath it. It's perfect. And how the devil that chap got that cottage so far away with just those flat strokes of the brush – Lord only knows.'

'Well, how *did* he?' I asked. At which he explained. But since I have no desire to assume, even for a moment, the mantle of Ruskin, I will not attempt to reproduce his explanation.

Tea arrived. I have an irresistible desire to be gossipy, and to state that it arrived in a large china tea-pot, with huge white cups, and the only sort of bread-and-butter which I can ever eat, in which hunks of



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

butter are attached precariously to small crumbs of bread. I have a desire to say all these things, but I will not say them. (Considering I have already done so, that is rather a delicate way of getting out of it, don't you think?) And as the tea was being consumed, and Orpen wrinkled his forehead and smoked the extreme end of his cigarette (he never seems to smoke any more than that), we talked about Picasso. Or, rather, I talked about Picasso.

For I had seen superb Picassos – Picassos that wrung the heart and caused the blood to flow more quickly through one's veins – and I could not reconcile these things with the other Picassos, those strange medleys of triangles and circles, with a little real gravel carefully deposited in the corner, and a piece of string stuck on to the side. I asked Orpen straight out if he thought Picasso in these pictures was a fraud.

He said, very slowly, but very emphatically: 'No. I've seen lovely Picassos myself. And I've seen the stringy ones, too.'

'Well, what do you think of them?'

'I think that if you put one of them up against a fake – the work of a *poseur*, a charlatan – you'd see the difference. But I think the habit of putting bits of string and glass eyes and damned heaps of gravel has had an awfully bad effect on a lot of people. I went to an exhibition in Paris not long ago, and the whole thing was blasted bits of string and newspaper, and circles and triangles, and Lord knows what. I'm sure a lot of those chaps were kidding. I'm equally sure that a lot of them weren't. In any case, I'm shy about condemn-

ing anything I don't happen to understand. I think of the old Scotch reviews. Remember them? They literally didn't know what Shelley was talking about when he wrote "The Cloud." Well—I mean to say . . .'

And *I* mean to say that Orpen, as far as I know him, through his works and through scattered tea-table talks, spread over a period of several years, is an artist who, unless one is misguided, will rank with the masters. For as I left him, it seemed to me that his mind was, in some ways, similar to that concave mirror which hangs on his wall facing the great window. It is a mirror in which ones sees life a little more vividly than through one's own eyes—a mirror which gives a certain unity or even the most ragged compositions. The greens in that mirror are more bright, the reds more glowing. As for the silver . . . which reminds me that, as I left the studio, the rain was still pelting down in torrents. And I have not yet changed my shoes. So that will be all for to-day, thank you very much.

# L

SIR ARTHUR PINERO

*or*

Plus ça Change

IN the morning, before breakfast, I had been running round Hyde Park, singing. There was a white mist on the grass and a scent of unborn lilac in the wind.

The morning, you will say, had nothing to do with Pinero. Oh yes, it had. For it had made me feel, in some subtle way, that the gap between his generation and my own was impassable. On all the other occasions when one had met him, one had been lulled into a premature middle age by the vast arm-chairs and the excellent food of the Garrick Club. In such surroundings he had seemed almost a contemporary. But as, in the middle of the day, I capered up Harley Street, having drunk a mild and yellow cocktail, I felt that I was going to see my grandfather in spirit as well as in age.

I want to plunge straight into the middle of our talk, omitting the long and rather delicate way in which I put to him, in a disguised form, the question which any young man would want to put to him – namely, ‘Do you feel as old-fashioned as some of the modern dramatists appear to think you?’ I therefore said to him:

MYSELF. I may seem an awful bore, but I want to

know something. It's about soliloquies. When you wrote soliloquies and asides in your drawing-room dramas, didn't it strike you at the time that they were – well, a little artificial? Ancient? Unnatural?

PINERO. One didn't think about it. One just accepted the convention of the period. And, after all, it wasn't such a bad convention as some of you seem to imagine. It saved a great deal of cumbersome drama. You could say in thirty seconds what might have taken three minutes if it had been necessary to bring on another character.

MYSELF. Of course, it was only a small distortion in an art which is itself distortion. (I didn't believe this.)

PINERO. I wouldn't say distortion. Stevenson said that the drama was a falsification of life. It isn't. It's a compression of life. The soliloquy was only one method by which one compressed. Take the *To be or not to be* soliloquy.

MYSELF. Ah, yes. That was inevitable. Nothing else could have done. To convey the chaos of his mind by any other means one would have had to bring on a dozen, a hundred, a thousand characters. They would all have robbed Hamlet of something of his glamour. They would all have confused the issue. But . . .

PINERO. Well?

MYSELF. We weren't talking of romantic drama. We were talking of drawing-room plays.

Pinero smiled and said, 'Oh, as to that, I gave up the use of soliloquies and asides before you were born.'

ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

I sat back and lit another cigarette – one of those nice cigarettes with cotton-wool behinds that are so interesting if lit in the wrong place. Sunshine was pouring in through the windows, gilding Sir Arthur's eyebrows until they looked like horns. The eyebrows moved slowly, wisely (to say 'quivered' would be to rob them of their weight). And he said:

PINERO. Do you realize that to-day I'm in an exceedingly difficult position as a dramatist?

MYSELF. No. Why?

PINERO. Well, whatever I wrote nowadays, I should be accused of imitating the younger men.

MYSELF. How do you mean?

PINERO. Take the present vogue for presenting tipsy women on the stage.

MYSELF. You don't mean to say that you wrote about tipsy women, too?

PINERO. I certainly did – 1896. *The Benefit of the Doubt*. Winifred Emery. There was an outcry at the time. But, of course (he shrugged his shoulders), nobody remembers it now.

I felt suddenly and unaccountably sad. I thought of a spring twilight in 1896 – the twilight of the 'nineties. I saw Pinero driving down the Haymarket in a hansom cab, on his way to see the tipsy creation of his genius. And I thought, too, of a raw twilight in 1966, with myself talking to a young man who had just informed me that some babe (as yet unborn) had written his autobiography. I heard my voice telling this shade: 'In 1926, my lad, I wrote my autobiography, too. But nobody remembers it now . . .'

PINERO. Nobody remembers it. It's the same with bedroom scenes. If I were to write a bedroom scene to-day they would all accuse me of trying to be 'modern.' Modern, indeed! I wrote a bedroom scene before the Boer War, in *The Gay Lord Quex*. Another outcry. The Bishop of Wakefield preached a sermon against me, and a certain Mr. Smith asked all sorts of pertinent and impertinent questions in the House of Commons.

I fortified myself with another cigarette. The revelation continued:

PINERO. Crinolines, too! Crinolines to-day are as common on the stage as turnips in a field. If I set a play in the crinoline period they would only say I was trying to be in the vogue. In the vogue! When I happen to be the first who ever put them on the stage. *Trelawny of the Wells*. They all said at the time: 'This is impossible. These great blustering hoops will only make people laugh.' They didn't make people laugh, though. They became extraordinarily popular. The artists loved them. Sickert began to paint them. Years and years and years ago. But nobody remembers that, either . . .

'This conversation,' I said, 'is becoming abominably like an interview. You know the sort of thing. "*The famous dramatist was then asked his opinion on modern comedy. 'There is no such thing,' he observed whimsically, as he tossed a few Scandinavian royalties contemptuously into the waste-paper basket.*" I do want to avoid that. But I do terribly want to know about your discovery of Mrs. Patrick Campbell.'

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

PINERO. We didn't really discover her. She had been playing leading parts in Adelphi melodramas for some time. Of course, in a sense, we gave her the first chance she had ever had. As a matter of fact, the story of how that happened is rather exciting.

I kept quiet, for his eyes were fixed, and he had the story-teller's look on his face.

PINERO. When we were casting *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* our first thought was for Mrs. Patrick Campbell. We could not get her, for she was already under contract. After a good many trials we decided to give the part to Miss Elizabeth Robins.

'On the day when I was going to read the play to the company at the theatre, Alexander suddenly came to me and said excitedly, "We can get Mrs. Campbell, after all."

'This was something of a dilemma. We had practically engaged Miss Robins. Our only justification for engaging Mrs. Campbell would be that she was so overwhelmingly good in the part that there could be no doubt of her superiority. I therefore said to Alexander, "Let's get her into the room and talk to her."'

Pinero turned to me and added: 'You can always tell an actress by talking to her — especially an emotional actress. Even if she only says good morning and blows her nose.

'Well, she came in the room. She swept up and down the room, like a wild thing in a cage. She left one a little breathless. One felt that at any moment she might fly out of the window. Perhaps that was because slanderous people were saying that she had

been subsisting entirely on claret and cigars for the past few weeks.

'When she had gone, I looked at Alexander, and Alexander looked at me. "If she can act on the stage as she has acted in this room . . ." I said.

'Alexander nodded. "But what about Miss Robins?"

' "That's your business," I said. "I'm going out to walk in St. James's Park for an hour or two. By the time I come back I shall expect you to have fixed on either one lady or the other. And I shall then read the play to whichever lady you have chosen."

'I went for my walk in the park. It was a glorious afternoon, and I must admit that I felt highly entertained. The prospect of Alexander deciding between the fiery Mrs. Campbell and the expectant Miss Robins was most intriguing. And I returned to that theatre before my hour had elapsed.

'Alexander met me at the stage door.

' "Well?" I said.

' "She's gone."

' "Yes, but which one?"

' "Miss Robins."

' "What happened?"

'Alexander smiled triumphantly. "She was an absolute brick," he said. "I explained the whole situation to her. And when I had finished, she put the book in my hands and said, "This part would have been the making of me. But Mrs. Campbell is my friend. I'm going." And she went."

'That,' concluded Pinero, 'was how Mrs. Campbell came to play Paula Tanqueray.'



ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

PINERO. It is about time that I interviewed you. You ought to have much more to tell me than I can ever tell you.

MYSELF. Yes?

PINERO. What do you think is the worst fault of the modern actor?

MYSELF. The same fault as the modern painter, writer, and architect. Which is, as a matter of fact, the public's fault. Specialization.

PINERO. Do you think they distrust versatility as much as ever?

MYSELF. Much more. If a dramatist makes a successful epigram, he must go on making epigrams for the rest of his life. If an actress makes a hit as a wronged woman, the path of virginity is barred to her for ever.

PINERO. That's abominable. Great art should have changes of mood as well as changes of style. That's why I think so highly of that fine actor Henry Ainley. He can do anything. In *Hamlet* he could play Hamlet, the Ghost, the Gravedigger, Laertes, Polonius.

MYSELF. His Ophelia would be interesting.

PINERO. Don't quibble. Versatility is a virtue, not a vice. It is a tragedy that we should grind people down to the same eternal job. It's as tragic as forcing a girl in a factory to spend her whole life running precisely identical screws into precisely identical plates.

MYSELF. I think it's worse for the writers.

PINERO. It wasn't so in my earlier days. We realized that Shakespeare wrote *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as well as *Othello*. When I had written a tragedy my whole soul called out for a comedy. It was

as though I had been living in the town for six months and was longing to get back to the fresh air of the country.

And there I end. Conversations should end like that, without the long-drawn wearisome waving of hands, grimaces and back-shufflings which in real life so often accompany them. I have copied most of this conversation straight out of my diary, whither I flew to transpose it after I had left him, and I think it is as accurate as one can make it. Strangely enough the quotation for the day, at the top of the page on which I began it, reads as follows:

‘When I was a young man, being anxious to distinguish myself, I was perpetually starting new propositions. But I soon gave this over, for I found that generally what was new was false. — Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, Vol. VII, chap. viii.’

# LI

SIR LANDON RONALD

*or*

A Little Crime

WE have so long been aware that addresses were given us to conceal our whereabouts that it is about time we began to realize that professions were given us to conceal our characters. That is why the average photographer should be prevented by law from taking pictures of judges in robes, Guardsmen in busbies, violinists with their violins, and Sir Hall Caine with his forehead. It is a form of silent lie. It is a mean deception practised on the general public, and as long as I wield a pen (as Mr. Horatio Bottomley would have said) I shall take no part in it.

Therefore, in writing of Sir Landon Ronald, I shall pluck the bâton from his hand, silence any voice that may be stirring in the neighbouring forests, and take him straight to the place where he really belongs—which is the Old Bailey. I regret to add that his position in that institution will not be in the dock, but on the right of the High Priest, Sir Ernest Wild, Recorder of London.

Study him as he sits there, looking very black and white against the scarlet and pink of the Judge, leaning over the long table, nose well forward, those piercing eyes fixed in an acute but kindly fascination on the

particular member of society who has been found out. And you will then realize the truth of what I said about professions and character. For, whatever emotions may be indicated by his back when he is conducting the 'Pastoral Symphony,' they are as nothing to the emotions which are betrayed by his eyes and lips when he is watching a great trial.

It is the passion of his life. Ever since he became Principal of the Guildhall School of Music, which is nearly seventeen years ago, the Old Bailey has drawn him like a magnet. Fortunately, his legal friends, chief of whom are the Recorder and Sir Henry Dickens, the Common Serjeant, have been only too glad to assuage this passion. I should imagine that they must find the presence of this distinguished musician positively exhilarating. For, as he himself once told me, electric shocks dart up and down his spine throughout the trials. His eyes almost jump out of his head when observing the forgers. His hair stands on end when listening to the details of the murder cases. His long lashes are frequently wet with tears. He flushes and pales, and clenches his fists. And always, as I say, the electric shocks flash along his spine.

I wonder how many people who have admired his interpretation of a Wagner overture realize how much it owes to the Old Bailey? For a passion so profound enters into a man's work, deepening it, giving it many shades of light and colour.

I once asked him if he ever followed any of the witnesses home. He shook his head. 'No,' he said, 'they follow *me* home. They haunt me!' And one night I

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

realized to what extent they haunted him. He and I and others had been dining, and were smoking a final cigarette before the melancholy necessity of joining the ladies. We were not being particularly amusing. And then somebody casually mentioned a case at the Old Bailey which they had seen reported in the evening newspapers. Instantly Sir Landon leant forward, eyes flashing (and, of course, electric sparks animating his spine), and began to talk about the case, the final stages of which he had witnessed that morning.

It was a love story. True, it was set in the most sordid surroundings, for it was centred round the murder, by a young girl, of her own child. Yet it had in it every element of tragedy. In five minutes he had us all enthralled. It was only the sternest sense of chivalry that dragged us away from the table to reunite ourselves with the attendant females. Never have I so greatly regretted the tiresome conventions of modern life. As we went upstairs I said to him, 'I insist on your telling me the rest of that story this evening.' He nodded. 'But not here. Outside.'

An hour later we were walking down the street together. It was a bitterly cold night—one of those nights when even the street lamps look frozen, and when the cats which one is lucky enough to meet in the street strike a chill to the heart when their backs are stroked. Yet we forgot the cold, walking slowly, with many halts, while he continued the tale of this tragedy. He seemed to take me back into the room where that murder had been committed; he painted the face of the accused, he imagined the grief which must have driven her, it

seemed for a moment as if he were himself possessed by her own forlorn spirit. Policemen passed us by suspiciously, taxis drifted away, there were specks of icy rain. Still he continued his story. And it was not till I got to bed that night that I realized I had caught a chill.

After this purple passage I fear that anything I can tell you about Sir Landon Ronald will appear pale and drab. What does it matter that he has the schoolboy's hobby for collecting autographs? That he once wrote to all the famous novelists in England asking them what they considered to be their best work, and why? That the said famous novelists all sent him an autographed volume of their best work, together with a proviso that he should not disclose the secret of their preference till after they were dead and buried? These are things of little account.

But I think I might dwell for one moment on his passion for minor poetry. His bookshelves are crowded with all those pink, speckled, brightly labelled volumes which enshrine the poetic fancies of the Edwardians and the Georgians. He has been collecting first editions of modern poets with undiminished ardour for twenty years. One of the first poets he ever collected was W. E. Henley. I must mention that name because there is a rather amusing story connected with it.

When W. E. Henley was still unknown, the young Landon Ronald picked up a volume of his poems, and was so fascinated by them that he set six of the shorter lyrics to music. (Personally, I have always thought Henley a poet of exceptional dullness, but that is beside the point.) When he had finished his musical version of

ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

the lyrics, he called them *Six Henley Songs* and took them to his publisher. The latter heard the songs, and was delighted with them. His only criticism had reference to the title. '*Henley Songs*,' he said. 'No. I don't like that. Too local. Why not *Regatta Songs*?'

Reading that story over again, I am bound to confess that it sounds exceedingly feeble. However, I shall keep it in. It is the sort of thing that makes the heart of the after-dinner speaker glad.

Forgive me, Sir Landon. I have said nothing of your work for English music. Perhaps it is too well known. Nor have I delved into the mysteries which you can bring to light from the slow movement of a Beethoven concerto. People can pay to hear these things for themselves. But they cannot pay to hear the story that you told me of that girl, under the lamplight, two winters past.

## LII

### OSBERT SITWELL

*or*

Poetry and Pose

IF there had not been an Osbert Sitwell in modern London, it would have been necessary to invent one. The same might be said of Jean Cocteau in Paris, and H. L. Mencken in New York. These persons form a sort of storm centre in their respective capitals, and, from their personalities rather than from the intrinsic merit of their work, provoke those bitter discussions and endless feuds which have so beneficent an effect upon present-day art and letters.

Let us endeavour to separate Osbert from Edith and Sacheverell. Family parties always bore me, and one Sitwell is quite enough to make a sinner. Besides, Osbert has a definite place of his own as a post-war young man, acutely discontented with his lot, worthy of study as a form of human question-mark posed at the end of many problems which we British, in our comfortable way, had regarded as permanently settled.

I think he is best illustrated by a series of brief vignettes showing him moving with his pale, rather Neronian face, his stooping back, a bundle of satires between his fingers, among little groups of ape-like men and women, who chatter at him fiercely, baring their teeth because he will not join in their little games or their little fights.



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

Before the first group, for example, which is labelled 'sportsmen,' he pauses, and in a tired, rather husky voice he says, 'I am very keen on games. They are indispensable for the people who do not play them. Golf, you see, removes from our sight all those who are devoted to it, and concentrates them on the links as though in a concentration camp. Moreover, it makes them wear a uniform so that they can easily be avoided.'

'A grouse moor, too, whisks them away to Scotland as if on a magic carpet, and there interns them to the sound of bagpipes during their most dangerous months.'

After which he sighs, and moves on to the next group, which, owing to the uproar proceeding from it, we know to be 'politicians.' As soon as he can make his voice heard he has a suggestion to offer as a cure for the present industrial unrest. It is that all the miners' sons should be sent to Eton, where 'they will be completely enervated, and rendered soft and useless as opponents of the rich.' Further on we find him informing another ape-man that the only way to stabilize politics is to let out Mr. Horatio Bottomley and make him lead the Conservative party. Finally, in the Imperialist group, he turns round, and says: 'If the British were turned out of India to-morrow, all that would be found is a broken-down bathroom and an empty whisky bottle.' One forgives the unwarranted bitterness of that remark for its pictorial brilliance.

He moves on once more, and now we find him among the apes of Chelsea. A woman who runs a bastard literary club approaches him. He has to say something to her, and so, wearily:

OSBERT. What a pretty room!

WOMAN. Do you *see* rooms?

OSBERT. Certainly.

WOMAN (*ecstatically*). I only see the sea and the Cornish hills.

OSBERT. That's very easily dealt with if you go to somebody really good.

Another woman comes up and tries to draw him into one of those pointless, abstract conversations which are merely stale newspaper articles rehashed. 'No woman has ever gained anything from domesticity,' she says, with a challenging glance.

Osbert looks at her a little coldly. 'What about Nell Gwynne?' he answers.

Once more he moves on until, in a large enclosure, he comes to a group which, by their close formation and orderly aspect, we recognize as soldiers. Looking at them through Osbert's eyes, we observe that they all seem to be either Colonels or Generals. Whether this is because he thinks that all the private soldiers have been killed or starved, or because he can only see through the eyes of hatred, I do not know. Peering intently at one of the apes, he writes down his own interpretation of ape-thought:

I fought for Britain with my might and main,  
I make explosives and I gave a son.  
My factory, converted for the fight,  
Now manufactures gas and dynamite,  
Which only pays me seventy per cent;  
And if I had ten other sons to send,  
I'd make them serve my country to the end.

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

Enough of our ape-promenade. You see the idea, at least? You might say he has a formula of bitterness. Even if he had, I should not blame him, because his generation have had enough in the last ten years to make them bitter, and in a world which is run by formulas they have to defend themselves.

But I do not think it is a question of a formula, simply because he gets such tremendous fun out of life, dancing among the snobs, the prigs, and the old-at-heart. Here are two little dramas which he created. I, for one, find them entertaining.

Scene one: A villa in Rome. A peppery French nobleman, who from his decrepit appearance might be either a retired general or a rising diplomatist, is explaining to Osbert how interested he is (being young at heart) in all modern English slang. 'What is it that I say instead of "tired"?' he is asking. And Osbert gravely replies, 'Blotto.'

Delighted with this information, the ancient goes round Rome, informing his English friends that he feels 'blotto,' and is charmed to find that they are invariably amused, as though so young-looking a man could not ever feel tired.

When two Englishmen were lunching with him, he had a room prepared for their siesta, as he courteously informed them that after their lunch they would be bound to feel quite blotto. And in the good old English sense they did, so that the room was not unnecessary.

'What an interesting word!' was his comment on his next meeting. 'Is it of military origin?'

'No,' replied Osbert. 'Indian. Like mufti or tiffin.'

Scene two: A road in Chelsea. Midnight. A lady with a curious passion for entertaining celebrities *en masse*, is giving a party. Opposite her house, perched on the roof, with a high-powered megaphone, is Osbert Sitwell, who has also been asked to the party, but has declined, owing to a previous engagement. Cars are rolling up to the door, and each time that a figure steps into the lighted hall a powerful phantom voice from the skies announces their identity.

For example, a meek editor, of strongly pacifist conviction, emerges.

'Signor Mussolini!' booms the voice. The butler pales, and the other guests in the hall turn round in astonishment. A rumour is begun that Mussolini really has come to the party in disguise, and everybody says, 'How like -'

Another car rolls up, and a popular actress walks across the pavement. As soon as she crosses the threshold, a stentorian cry causes everybody to draw aside.

'Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Albany.'

And thus it goes on. Before the doors are closed the voice has announced the arrival of the Prince of Wales, Mr. Sinclair Lewis, the ex-Kaiser, Mary Pickford, and countless other celebrities.

There was quite an air of suspense over that party.

## LIII

### MARIE TEMPEST

*or*

Becky was an Artist

TELL me the things that a man remembers, and I will tell you what manner of man he is.

I myself am always remembering the wrong sort of things. I can remember the rather hard pale line of President Wilson's lips, but I have forgotten nearly all the words that issued from them. I can remember the exact spot on the pavement of the Parthenon on which you can most clearly see the moon rise, like a silver apple, between the columns, but I have long forgotten most that I have ever learnt of Greek political history.

And of Marie Tempest, my most vivid memory, strangely enough, has nothing to do with her theatrical triumphs. In fact, it is as far removed from the theatre as possible, for the scene of it is laid in a train.

It is a French train rattling over the rails from Paris to Calais at the breakneck speed which makes one vow that one's next journey will be accomplished by air. We are sitting in the dining car after lunch, surrounded by the usual empty bottles of Evian water, breathing the familiar atmosphere of stale cigar smoke. And Marie Tempest is sitting very still, her absurdly small head resting on her absurdly small hand, her eyes looking straight out of the window, *hating*.

I use the verb as though it needed no object, because of the intensity with which she hated. As a matter of fact the verb had an object – a very disagreeable object – a mutual acquaintance whom we both cordially, and I think rightly, detested. We had been discussing this object; but whereas my dislike had been of the ordinary variety – you know the sort of thing – ‘ought to be shot and thrown into the ‘Thames’ – hers had been almost terrifying. She hated with her whole body. She hated like a burning flame. And it was with a feeling of relief that, a few days later, I saw the object of our hatred, apparently quite unharmed by either psychic or material darts, making its placid and unpleasant matutinal promenade down Bond Street.

Well, like Dr. Johnson, I love a good hater. And ever since then, I have felt that I knew at least part of the secret which has lifted Marie Tempest on to her lofty but exceedingly delicate pinnacle, and kept her there while dozens of other comedy actresses have tottered and fallen around her, leaving nothing but a few memories and a heap of yellowing Press cuttings. She is so utterly ‘thorough’ whether she is hating, loving, laughing, or acting. Her success is not merely a question of a few happy tricks, a few fluttering gestures, a name, a careful adjustment of the limelight. It is really a proof of the almost forgotten fact that a good deal of genius lies in the capacity for taking pains.

I should like to quote from a letter she once wrote to me. There is a passage in it which illustrates what I mean,

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

'My fetish is a sense of proportion. The breathing in the right place, the accentuating a single word to make the rhythm; the perfection of Kreisler's bowing – my ideal of the divine artist, which differentiates him from every other musician. What volumes could be written on that sense of proportion! The ignorant call it trickery. Ye gods!'

Who gave her that sense, I wonder? Was it old Garcia, in the girlhood days when she was taking singing lessons from him with the golden dream of becoming a concert-artist, and being paid five, or even ten, guineas for a single evening? She has shown me some of the songs which she learnt from him, not only marked in pencil, but literally stabbed through with his angry pen whenever she had been guilty of the slightest inaccuracy.

'Lessons like that linger on throughout one's whole life,' she said to me. 'And I believe that one of the things that have helped to keep me up to the mark has been the fact that I have had this musical education. If you look at acting in terms of music you begin to treat it at once as something more accurate and more emotional. More accurate because, just as you can't play a single wrong note in a Bach fugue without the whole audience knowing it, so you can't say a single wrong word or make a single wrong intonation in your part without being acutely conscious of it.

'And more emotional because – well, just think of any rôle in terms of music and you will see what I mean.'

I thought and realized that it was true. There are

parts by Eugene O'Neill which might have been written by Brahms, rôles by Maeterlinck which instantly suggest César Franck. And Marie Tempest, even when she is playing a rôle which is really unworthy of her, always brings to it something of the lightness, the cool, clean lines of Mozart. Not by chance, if you please, but by a combination of genius and pains. It is as though the shadow of old Garcia were constantly behind her, waiting to stab her with his angry pen. As a result, even to this day, she takes up every rôle more with the feelings of a pupil than the airs of a star.

Imagine that we are watching her at a rehearsal. She walks on to the stage holding her script in her hand. The play proceeds. Her entrance is announced. She begins to read, entirely flatly. A pause. 'How do you want me to do this?' she asks the producer. He tells her. Like an obedient child, she does it. Another pause. 'Where do I stand now?' He tells her. Again — obedience. Another pause. 'Did I take that all right?' He tells her. She acquiesces.

Then gradually, as the date of production draws near, she builds up her part. How, when, and where, nobody has ever been able to tell me. Some of it, of course, is done on the stage, but the nearest I can take you to the actual 'workshop' is outside the door of her room at home, where one can hear strange little mutterings and chantings, the same phrase sometimes repeated over and over again, as though the young singing pupil were once more humming over a difficult legato passage for the fierce but beloved Garcia. Oh, thank Heaven, she *does* take pains. Simply because she *is* a genius. All



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

geniuses ought to be forced to scourge themselves. She has never been afraid to do so.

Walk into her house in Upper George Street (this is not an open invitation, but a figure of speech) and you will see the same indication of ordered beauty. Two little trees outside the door – every leaf in its right place. Various shades of green inside the house. It is always the right green (which is saying a lot, for it is more easy to be fooled by green than by any other colour in the world). A few pictures, so placed that they are inevitable, that they could not possibly be anywhere else. I cannot go on in this strain, because it is beginning to sound exactly like ‘Miss Vera Vavaseur – at home. Special supplement to the *Spinster's Leisure Hour*.’

I can only say that it is the sort of house that Becky Sharp must have had when she wriggled into her little nest in Curzon Street. Becky Sharp – I know that Marie Tempest will forgive me when I say that she has much in common with that entrancing creature. She has her wit, her temper, her sense of music, her capacity for twisting people round her little finger. But Becky one day ceased to take pains, and she ceased to be Becky. It is a great tribute to Miss Tempest that we cannot even imagine her ceasing to be Marie.

THE curtain rises on a luxurious interior. It is night. The windows are half open, and the blind drifts out, blown by the spring breeze, hovers, and flutters back again.

At a desk, lit by a green lamp, a man sits writing. A long cigarette-holder is in his mouth, and every few minutes the fag end of a cigarette is removed and scrunched on to the ash-tray, while another almost mechanically takes its place. The face of the writer is strangely like those faces of master criminologists which adorn the paper jackets of popular detective stories. It is keen and smooth, with a broad forehead, and what I believe is usually described as a 'limber' mouth. It bears an expression which one might be excused for calling inscrutable.

Save for the presence of Mr. Edgar Wallace, whom you will have guessed this silent figure to be, the stage remains empty for several minutes. Then, there is a knock at the door. The figure, still writing, still smoking, mutters, 'Come in.' Into the room, shyly, awkwardly, cap in hand, there ambles a singular individual, who seats himself on the edge of the sofa. Slowly Mr. Wallace turns in his chair, regards his visitor with keen eyes, and says . . .

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

Well, of course he *ought* to say (gruffly), 'So . . . you have come!' Or (in a cold voice), 'I gathered that you would not ignore my message.' However, he probably only says, in his abrupt, staccato way, 'How's the wife? Have a drink.' For his visitor is a burglar – a real, genuine, honest-to-God burglar who has just come out of prison. Wallace knows many such. He gives them money. He helps them to go straight. He gets them jobs. He even buys them tickets to Margate – an example, I should have thought, of mistaken zeal, for surely Margate is enough to turn any man into a criminal, even if he were not one before.

'You would have made a first-class criminal yourself,' I said to him once, and his answer was, 'Yes, I believe I should. I think, for one thing, I should have made a first-class confidence trickster. I could have worked some pretty burglaries, too. You see, there aren't any really master criminals about now. There are men who can open a safe quickly enough, men with a brilliant mechanical capacity, but they haven't real creative genius. . . . Now, supposing . . .'

He leant forward, his eyes lit up, and he began to talk about some of the obvious errors into which even the most skilful criminals may fall. As I listened I thought how thankful London should be that his plays and books are such a success, for if ever he had a period of failure, fell on evil days, and needed a few odd thousands, it would be so easy for him to form one of those mysterious gangs of which he writes, to plan baffling escapades, to fool the men of property to the top of their bent.

For there is nothing about criminals which he does not know. He told me extraordinary things. Were you aware, for example, that when a big burglary is brewing, the 'fence' – (i.e., the man who is to receive the goods when they are stolen) – often pays a visit to the scene of action, days *before* the crime is actually committed? Supposing the gang has settled on a jeweller's shop in the West End. The 'fence' puts on his best hat, summons an amiable smile to his features, and visits the shop, where he makes a rapid valuation of all the portable objects. Then he walks out again, informs the gang that he will pay them such and such a price, and after a certain amount of haggling, the matter is settled.

I do not imagine that Wallace numbers many 'fences' among his friends, because the 'fence,' after all, is rather a low fellow, though he has his place in Society, like all the rest of us. But he numbers at least one 'kite' maker. (I love these technical phrases.) A 'kite' apparently is a forged cheque. You will not find it mentioned in the Trades Directory, but it is a very ancient and a very skilled profession. And once one has adopted it, a very strong will (or an unexpected bequest) is needed before one can give it up. Wallace told me of a certain pub in a certain road, where these outcasts congregate – how a man who had just been freed from prison dropped in for a drink, how another man came up to him with a blank cheque, offering a tanner if he would 'kite' it, and how . . . But that is a long story.

I should like to be Edgar Wallace – like to sit back in that desk, with that long cigarette-holder, pondering,

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

with half-closed eyes, the ramifications of some baffling crime, and then going out into the highways and by-ways, engaging in many strange encounters, rubbing shoulders with many queer and furtive figures. I asked him if he was not tempted to try his hand at some crime, merely for the sake of it. 'After all,' I said, 'you could always put the things back.' 'I might feel tempted,' he reflected, 'if Scotland Yard were full of Sherlock Holmes's. The thing would be easy then. But the men at Scotland Yard are a good deal more dangerous than Sherlock Holmes. They're full of common sense. They're never put off the scent by fantastic clues. They're dogged – they go on and on, and still on. In fact, they're like good newspaper reporters. The principles are exactly the same. I'm a reporter myself. I was a crime reporter for nine years. I'm still a crime reporter. I shall never be anything else.'

It says much for his own good nature that, in spite of those nine years in daily contact with the so-called enemies of society, he should not have become an incurable cynic. But he understands criminals too well to hate them. His hatred is almost exclusively reserved for those who tamper with the lives of children – to him, the one unforgivable crime. For the rest, it is all a game of psychological hide-and-seek. 'Do you realize,' he said to me, 'that nine out of every ten murderers are actuated mainly by *vanity*?' It seemed a strange thesis, but he made it convincing. 'If you really get into the average murderer's mind,' he went on, 'you will find that the desire to kill was nearly always prompted by a fear of being made to look petty or ridiculous in the eyes

of somebody whom the murderer considered to be important in his life. Crippen, who was really a very nice little man, would probably never have killed his wife if he had not been afraid that the neighbours would cease to regard him as respectable for carrying on with Ethel le Neve while his wife was still alive. Crippen's vanity was a sort of bourgeois respectability. And it is one of the ironies of fate that it led him to the gallows.

'I can give you an example, where I proved myself right simply by recalling this vanity "complex." Some years ago a boy of sixteen was charged with the murder of a girl in Wales. He was acquitted. He returned home in triumph. He was made a hero – the whole district fêted him. I was asked to write an article on the subject. I was convinced that he was, in fact, the murderer, but I could not say that. I was convinced, moreover, that the fêting of this youth was in itself a tragedy, because it would stimulate his vanity to get another crime. And therefore I wrote that the public should be prepared for a similar outrage, in the same district, before many days had elapsed. It occurred within a week. The same youth had done it.' Vanity – vanity – all is vanity. I thank my stars for my own deep-rooted and overpowering modesty, for I write at a time when a lady has just startled us by appearing in eight separate portions in a trunk, and I should hate to have to treat anybody like that.

## LV

HUGH WALPOLE

*or*

Second Thoughts

I stood outside Hugh Walpole's door, filled with fear. Not, let me hasten to assure you, because I am usually alarmed by authors. In fact, ever since the publication of *Twenty-Five* they seem to be rather alarmed by me.

No. My terror in that dusky corridor outside Hugh Walpole's 'gentleman's chambers' (exquisite phrase) in Piccadilly had a purely personal origin. You see, I had been abominably rude to him in *Twenty-Five*. I open his little chapter at random and I find this sort of thing:

He was born middle-aged.

He is a little worrying, on account  
of his appearance of complacency.

He is genteel.

And a lot more to that effect. Well, the book appeared, and duly slithered its way on to Hugh Walpole's desk. And apparently he only chuckled. At any rate, he sat down and wrote to me, 'Did I really strike you like that? You had better come and have another shot. Your doddering old grandfather, Hugh Walpole.'

All of which affected me profoundly. Throughout the week preceding that lunch the sky seemed thick inlaid with coals of fire. However, it had to be done, and when I did eventually walk through his door, having previously sustained myself by two dry Martinis the situation seemed to clear itself at once. His beaming, claret-coloured face was like a beacon on this bleak day.

‘Wasn’t I abominable?’ I said.

‘I loved it.’

A cocktail – my third – loomed by me. I looked suspiciously at the cherry floating in its yellow pool. I took it. And then I spluttered with laughter. And thus, with one sharp crack, the ice was broken.

‘You know,’ I said, ‘one of the reasons why I hated you so much was that your praises had been sung to me so incessantly by –’ (mentioning a mutual friend).

‘She was much worse about you,’ said Hugh. ‘She used to croon, “Why don’t you ask him to lunch?” in a sort of monotone, until I felt I never wanted to see you again.’

Pause. Munching of fish. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye. He did the same. More munching of fish. I began to feel awkward. I sniffed some red wine. Better – oh, much better.

‘The awful thing is that I’ve never read half the things you wrote.’

‘I know *that*.’

‘Are you hideously rich?’

‘No.’



ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

'But don't you sell about a million copies of everything in America?'

'No. You *have* got funny ideas, haven't you? I sell much less than that.'

'Pah!' I said. 'Less than a million? Is that all? It sounds as though you were a Latin dictionary.'

'Well, I'm either just not bad enough or just too good to be a best seller.'

Crash went the first illusion. I had thought him puffed up with pride. But this was not the remark of a proud man. An author who admits to an American sale of less than a million copies, in the hearing of his own butler, whose waxen face hovered over us . . .

Lunch is over. We can talk at last. We are sitting back in our arm-chairs, and suddenly I find that conversation is flowing quickly, with that smooth, rippling undercurrent which is one of the greatest delights of life. I begin to unburden my heart to him. I say:

'Are you happy?'

'Yes. Quite. Aren't you?'

'I see no reason for happiness.'

Walpole pointed out that I had health and youth, and work to do.

'You know perfectly well,' I said, 'that none of those things really make any difference when one is in love.'

'Are you in love?'

I nodded. Simultaneously it occurred to me that this situation was really extraordinary. Here was I baring my soul to a man whom I had publicly insulted.

He said: 'Are things going wrong?'

'No.'

'Then what's the matter?'

'They *will* go wrong, sooner or later.'

Then – as though I were writing a letter to Auntie Flossie in *Home Snippets* – I told him all about it. I told him how and when and where. I even told him what. (Of course, I didn't tell him which.) And all the time he listened gravely. I should imagine that I was excessively tedious. That is why I am going to draw a pen through all that I had written after this, so that you shall never see it.

Enough. Piccadilly was growling outside. We both heard it. It was insistent, magnetic, that slow roar. We both rose to our feet, a little excited by the call. We grabbed at our hats. We went down the rich and sumptuous staircase. We opened the door. A rush of noise, a buffet of wind, and Piccadilly was before us. We had come back to life.

As we jogged along, each swinging an umbrella, and keeping step with delicate precision, I tried to get a grip of the man on my right. When I first met him, I could not believe that he had enthusiasms. But now he was beaming all over. I felt that at any moment his umbrella would open and shower the pavement with golden sovereigns. Unfortunately, it did no such thing.

We turned into Burlington House. It was the time of the Sargent Exhibition. We glided through the turnstiles. We passed behind a little trio of old ladies who were pressing their noses against the pictures and delivering cooing, broken judgments about them.

'Did you hear that?' whispered Hugh.

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

'The one on the right said that "the hands were horrible."'

'Yes. But the one on the left was better. She said "the tuft on the head was in the wrong place."'

We paused to pay momentary homage to a poem in rose and blue, and went on.

'Of course,' he said, 'the one thing which everybody says about Sargent's work is the one thing that makes me suspect him. They say . . .'

Rudely, in order to prove my brightness, I interrupted him. 'They say, "To think that one man should have done all this!"'

He looked at me rather reproachfully.

'You spoilt my remark,' he said. 'But that *was* what I was going to say. One oughtn't to think that. Personally I don't think it. Some of these things seem to me quite dreadful. For instance . . .'

He pointed to the picture of—

Boredom was in every line of it. A mist of ennui seemed to hang over the satin frock. The hands flagged with fatigue. The eyes were dead of all delight. The composition was like an immense yawn.

'God! How that woman bored him!' I breathed.

'A lot of women bored him. I think he preferred to paint men. Look at that.'

We stood in front of the strange portrait of a young man in black. I cannot remember its name. But it is an almost terrifying criticism of life. Sermons lie in the pallor of that young man's cheeks. The black dress is eloquent. The stick points you to— But I rather shudder to think of its destination.

## H U G H      W A L P O L E

When we emerged from the Academy, I felt so happy with the world in general. The rain was just stopping, and there was enough sun on the umbrellas to give one a sense that Piccadilly was a jangling musical box of light. There was enough noise to serve as a dark, irregular background to our voices. A red crocodile of buses growled slowly towards the Circus. I got on to one of them, waving my umbrella into Hugh's face and almost putting his eye out. He crossed the road, wiping the mud from his nose, and entered a taxi. Life bore us quickly away from one another.

## LVI

H. G. WELLS

*or*

Multum in Parvo

‘**O**F course, I’ve got bad manners. I sometimes spoil a perfectly good case by something that I say or do, or some way in which I say or do it.’

He made this observation sitting in his favourite hunched-up pose beside a window through which one could see autumnal trees and a grey, hurrying stretch of Thames. There is something, I think, a little typical of H. G. Wells in the very way in which he sits down. The spine is curved, the small hands are tucked away, the neck is bent. The whole posture suggests a spring at tight pressure which may at any moment uncoil itself and leap out in the most surprising directions.

Now, when anybody tells me that they have bad manners, I am the last person to contradict them. But if Wells *has* bad manners, I think I know why. When one has a searchlight vision, a Kodak style, and, above all, an encyclopædic mind, the mental processes of, say, the ordinary classical scholar must make one feel inclined to scream with boredom.

I said to him: ‘I suppose that if a general knowledge paper could be set to the entire intelligentsia of the world, you would probably be top boy. Wouldn’t you?’

He shook his head. 'Oh, no. At any rate, I don't think so. It would be rather good fun to try it. Arnold Bennett would do very well. And Gilbert Murray, of course. As for Hilaire Belloc, *he'd* answer every question, and produce a unique collection of schoolboy howlers. But, anyway, what *is* general knowledge?'

'I should have thought, if anybody knew that, you did,' I said. 'In fact, don't you sometimes say, "I know enough"? Don't you say, "I know this and that and the other, and it doesn't profit me very much, because one never really knows anything at all; and a life-time's study of even the tiniest section of science amounts to no more than scratching a few feeble lines on the surface"?'

He shook the idea from him, as something unworthy and soft, in the same way that one might shake a slug which had fallen on to one's shoulder. 'If you begin to feel like that, it's merely a sign of fatigue. I'm not fatigued. I don't see myself becoming fatigued.' And he added some phrases which tallied almost exactly with what he wrote in his controversy with Hilaire Belloc: 'I see knowledge increasing and human power increasing. I see ever-increasing possibilities before life, and I see no limits set to it all. Existence impresses me as a perpetual dawn. Our lives, as I apprehend them, swim in expectation.'

'Our lives swim in expectation.' That is a good phrase. It has a schoolboy freshness about it, all the more remarkable when one realizes that it comes from a man of sixty years old, a man, moreover, who does not hesitate to admit to himself that he and all the rest of

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

us are standing on the edge of every sort of disaster. You know that, of course, from his works. But it becomes a little more impressive when he says it, with his drooping neck and his curved, spring-like body.

'I believe there's a crash coming,' he said gently. 'In fact, I *know* there's a crash coming, as far as it's humanly possible to know anything at all. We've got to have a complete readjustment of the political systems of Europe, together with, or rather arising from, an equally complete moral and intellectual revolution. Well, that's a big business, a colossal business. But I don't think it's an impossible business. I don't think, for example, that we shall relapse into barbarism, as some people suggest, with a vastly depleted population and a reversion to primitive methods of life. I don't see that happening. But . . .'

I interrupted him. 'Do you remember your *New Machiavelli*?'

He smiled. 'A middle-aged book.'

'I read it when I was sixteen,' I told him. 'And there's a piece of rhetoric in it which I learned by heart. Or nearly by heart. You said: "*We do go on, we do get on. But when one thinks that people are living and dying now, quarrelling and sulking, misled and misunderstanding, vaguely fearful, condemning and thwarting one another in the close darkness of these marrow cults and systems — oh, God! one wants a gale out of heaven, one wants a great wind from the sea!*" Do you still feel like that?'

'Doesn't everybody feel like that?' He paused. 'I suppose not. But everybody in England *should* feel

like that. This year has been the most disastrous year for England that ever I can remember. An utter bankruptcy of ideas on either side.' (He was referring to the coal strike.) 'A sort of sickly inertia over everything. Stagnation . . . an apparent dissolution. . . . It's curious, when I think of what I used to imagine the British Empire might become . . .'

I had never regarded him as even theoretically an Imperialist. That was before my time, as he proceeded to remind me.

'I used to think the British Empire might be the means of realizing a great international brotherhood. I really did think that – at any rate until the end of the last century. Funny, isn't it? Yet it isn't really so funny. Because, till the Boer War, there was every reason to hope it. Every reason, at least, to cling to the hope. But after the Boer War, those hopes died. At least, they died as far as I was concerned. The Boer War was the beginning of the crash, and we have been getting nearer it ever since. And now . . .'

A hand uncoiled itself, fluttered in the air, sank back on to his knees. 'And now . . .'

He smiled at me as though I were to answer the problem.

But I cannot answer it. No familiarity with the by-ways of Mr. Wells's Utopias – those dream-cities which he builds so feverishly as a sort of retreat from the world of which he occasionally despairs – no hope of these new worlds has come to me. The young men of to-day do not dream dreams any more than the old men, apparently, see visions. Dreams hurt, nowadays.

I said, 'The world of which he *occasionally* despairs.'



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

For nobody with such an abnormally efficient pituitary gland could really despair very long about anything. And, in the light of my recent researches into organotherapy, I thus considered him. I thought of his early days – First Class Honours Royal College of Science, Zoology B.Sc. – I thought of the outburst of scientific romances which lit up the lazy shadows of the *fin de siècle*, I thought of that curious mixture of dreams and horse-sense, *A Modern Utopia*, of the pleadings for Socialism, that are so intensely individualistic.

I thought of the quick flashes of wit with which he lights his conversation – as when he said to me rather plaintively that ‘it was a pity so many babies besmirched their own reputations by calling every man they met “father!”’

I thought of the wars which he foretold before the war, of the peaces which he dreamed during the war, and, finally, of the history of mankind which he pondered after the war, sitting hunched up in his chair, while the whole pageant of mankind, headed by the Neanderthal man, wound, in well-ordered precision, through his astonishing brain, and while the Thames hurried by outside the window, whispering, ‘Men may come and men may go, but Wells goes on for ever.’

## LVII

REBECCA WEST

*or*

A Sanger Born

SOMEWHERE in Soho Square is an establishment where celebrities go to be filmed. It is called the Topical Film Company, and I shall never forget the celebrities who, at a private view, struck me as the most hideous collection of monsters that I have yet encountered. Mr. Bernard Shaw, for example, looked entirely tipsy; Sir Landon Ronald had the appearance of an ancient ram; and as for a certain famous female diarist — she was like nothing so much as a human vulture, about to eat its young.

Among the celebrities who have thus offered themselves for public inspection is Miss Rebecca West. As a matter of fact, I went through this ordeal with her, so that, if you ever see her face flash across the screen in your favourite cinema, you will be able to explain her somewhat pained expression by the knowledge that she was talking to me while she was being filmed. The scene was really rather ridiculous. They took us to a room containing nothing but a dazzling light and some machines. They placed Miss West on a small chair facing the camera, and they placed me opposite her. They then said to her, 'Please talk, and at a given moment look across

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

at Mr. Nichols, who will interject some provocative remark!’

The handle moved and she began to talk. For some reason best known to herself, she began to talk about Lord Beaverbrook. The director asked her if she had seen him lately. ‘Yes,’ she replied; ‘I went down to . . .’ And then the director gave the signal. ‘You’re a liar,’ said I. I could think of nothing else to say. Miss West turned very sharply, with admirably dramatic effect, which the camera had not failed to register. And she began to remonstrate.

We went afterwards to see the results of this odd experiment, and we came to the conclusion (Miss West and I) that she looked like a negro chief eating spaghetti against time. Her hair seemed to have largely disappeared and a flat male crop glistened against the screen. Her quite normal complexion had assumed an African tinge. The beads round her neck added to the savage effect. And the sudden turn of her head when I told her she was a liar was almost cannibal in its intensity.

Well, the object of those films was to give the film phrenologist a chance of phrenologizing the various celebrities of this land, and explaining their characteristics by means of the bumps on their foreheads, the shape of their ears, the tilt of their noses, etc. I saw a list of these quaint analyses of character, and I remember that Owen Nares’s ears meant ‘repose,’ and that Mr. Bernard Shaw’s forehead indicated ‘originality.’ I suggested, a little tentatively, that, since Mr. Shaw had explained his theories of life in several million

words of print, one might obtain a truer view of his qualities by reading his works than by studying the shape of his face. The suggestion was not welcomed.

Miss West emerged from this contest supported by the knowledge that she had 'magnetic eyes.' I suppose she has, but somehow they are not the features on which I should have fastened. I should have said, instead, that she had a rather impertinent mouth, and extremely humorous eyes that pop from side to side in perpetual amusement at the follies of life. In fact, now that my pen has begun to move with such unwonted rapidity, I might as well confess that she seems to me to be more of a Sanger than a West. She would have fitted in perfectly with the establishment of the *Constant Nymph*. I can see her climbing up those mountains, being rude to Trigorin, worshipping at the shrine of Dodd – but really, there are limits. It is enough to say that she is a Sanger born, by which I mean that she cares not a rap for the conventions (a hackneyed phrase, but terrifying when it is true), and that she cares very much indeed for intelligence and for truth.

One is not altogether inaccurate in describing her as a Sanger. 'My mother was Scotch and my father was Irish,' she once told me. 'They were both extremely brilliant. I have a sister who is amazingly intelligent. When I was a girl we all used to talk at once, very loudly, and without any thought for each other's feelings. As a result, I am probably more honest than most women, and I have never had any particular diffidence in giving an opinion, provided that people wished

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

to have it. If they didn't wish to have it, they usually didn't get it.'

That has the authentic Sanger touch, that girlhood. So has her subsequent career. When I told her that I wanted to write about her — this information was imparted in a dentist's waiting-room — I said, 'I cannot spend the entire article in telling people that your face is not like that of an African negro. I ought to say something about your hideous past.'

'Very well, then,' she replied. 'Tell them that from the age of fifteen to seventeen I grew carrots on the top of a hill near Edinburgh.'

'Surely nothing so beautiful as that has ever come into your life?'

'Indeed, yes. It is perfectly true. I was ill, and they sent me to a market garden. After I had grown a sufficient number of carrots I became well again. Then I went to the Academy of Dramatic Art; but you needn't say much about that, because I was exceedingly miserable while I was there. Then I wrote my first article.'

'What was it?'

'I forget. But it was in a faintly shady paper. I didn't write it because I particularly wished to write it, but because I was asked to do so. And that is what has been happening ever since. People asked me to write articles, and, because I have a very obliging nature, I wrote articles. People then suggested that I should write reviews, and, in order to have a quiet life, I wrote reviews. People then indicated that they would like me to write novels, and with habitual docility I wrote

novels. I am sure that somebody will shortly come up to me and suggest that I should write a Lyceum melodrama. If they do, in order to avoid trouble, I shall certainly write one. I have never written anything in my life without being asked for it, and that is the truth.'

'In fact,' I said, 'one might really describe you as the woman who can't say no.'

'In a literary sense, yes.'

'That will be a marvellous title for the article.' And I withdrew from the dentist's room.

As I went out, there was a sudden scurry behind me.

'In a *strictly* literary sense,' said Miss West.

'Yes,' said I.

And, having said all this, I must make a confession. About four years ago there appeared in a dull but very influential paper a review of a book which I had written about post-war Oxford. The review consisted chiefly of quotations from the more lurid parts of the work, but there was a pure gem of criticism at the end. As far as I remember, it read: 'We are more than ever regretful, after studying this book, that corporal punishment has ceased to be fashionable in Oxford. It would probably have been Mr. Nichols's salvation.'

The review was signed - 'Rebecca West.' Bless her!

## LVIII

### JIMMIE WHITE

*or*

How to be a Millionaire

**I**F you want to know the time, do not ask Mr. James White. He will not be able to tell you. All the watches which at various times have been presented to him by punctilious friends are put away in drawers, to tick themselves to rest while their owner marches on his timeless way. Watches were made for 'boobs,' not for him.

That seems to me a remarkable and significant trait. Here is a man who has risen from nothing to a position in which he buys theatres, racehorses, mansions, or British Empire Exhibitions with equal sang-froid. And he has never known the time or wanted to know it.

Now, whether you admire that trait or not, you must admit that it is a refreshing change. One had always imagined that the only way to become a millionaire was by living in a state of perpetual and abject servility to one's alarum clock, by 'Filling the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds' worth of distance run,' and all that sort of dreary nonsense. Thank Heaven it is not true. There is hope for the rest of us yet. (

However, Jimmie White (if he will forgive me calling him by the name that suits him best) confessed to me the other day that this happy ignorance of time has

## J I M M I E W H I T E

its disadvantages. Imagine, for example, that he has promised to put money on a horse for the three o'clock race. The race is run, the horse wins. Some hours after it is all over, after the shouting is done, after the captains and the kings have departed, Mr. White goes to the telephone and lavishly backs the glorious animal. It is a pity, is it not? For that has happened twenty times already during the present season. If only book-makers were human, they would make some special arrangements by which his bets were taken at any time during the day of the race.

Still, the disadvantages are outweighed by the advantages. He is perfectly capable of sitting down and working for twenty-four hours on end without realizing it. His brain acts with such an uncanny speed that, the moment he begins a thing, he becomes a mass of hard concentration which nothing can disturb. To use his own words: 'I could work in a ruddy earthquake.' He could. He could also sleep in a ruddy earthquake. Once he falls asleep he never wakes up of his own accord. Rude hands have to shake him from his repose. He is like a machine that ought, by all the laws of morals and mechanics, to run down, and perversely refuses to do so.

If, therefore, I were a stenographer (an occupation which has always seemed to me full of quiet fun) I should steer very clear of Jimmie White. For his dictation resembles ordinary dictation as much as big-game hunting resembles poultry farming. When he dictates three stenographers sit round him, pale, but determined. He begins to talk. Three heads are bent



## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

low, and three hands begin to ache. After an hour or so the three stenographers wilt away, to be replaced by another three, and yet another three. He sometimes goes on for six hours without stopping, heedless of the bodies of expiring women that are, from time to time, carried through his door. It is all in the day's work.

Time, again, you see. If he had a watch he would be for ever looking at it, realizing that it was time to eat, or drink, or dress. But he has no watch, and he therefore deals, not in periods, but in accomplishments. He sees a job as a whole — a thing to be finished at one sitting rather than attacked piecemeal. That is why he is Jimmie White.

Curiously enough, the only occasion when he takes time into account is an occasion when most of us agree to forget it. I refer to the reading of a novel. He told me that the test of a good novel was that one should be able to read it in two hours. If it took more than two hours, it was a bad novel.

Well, Mr. White ought to know. According to his own confession, he reads a novel a day, devouring with equal rapacity all the thrillers that come his way. A great many of these novels are read in the train while he is travelling between London and Manchester, and Mr. White, though he does not carry a watch, is able to tell you at any moment during the journey, by the number of pages he has read, the name of the next station. At page 50 he is flying past — ; at page 100 he is about to enter — ; at page 150 he skims by — ; and somewhere about the last chapter he is on the outskirts of Manchester. I imagine that the prize for excellence

## J I M M I E W H I T E

is given to the novelist who manages to bring together the lips of his hero and heroine at the precise moment that the engine bumps into the buffers of Manchester Station (if such a procedure in this holy city would not cause the engine to be dismantled for indecency).

Concerning the writing of novels, also, he has his theories. He keeps an eagle eye open to detect a flagging of inspiration on the part of the author. And he detects it with such deadly accuracy that one is inclined to regret that he did not adopt the profession of sleuth-hound. He told me that he was once reading a popular author's work and came to a passage where he spied a lack of continuity in the chain of thought. He at once sat down and wrote a letter to him, saying: 'I should guess that you slacked off for four days between chapters six and seven.' 'You're wrong,' replied the author; 'I slacked off for five.'

I feel diffident about discussing his theatrical moods, for a taste for English musical comedy is not among my virtues. It is true that I can gain a certain malicious pleasure from a third-rate provincial company, in guessing the age of the jokes, the flatness of the tenors, and the measurements of the leading ladies. But at Daly's, where everything runs according to plan, I am bored stiff. I find the antics of the choruses less graceful and far less useful than those of cows in a field. I find the inevitable theme of Balkan intrigue even more dreary in its musical version than in the dispatches of newspaper correspondents. I am miserable the whole way through.

Jimmie White, however, must enjoy producing these

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

horrors. For he knows three things — exactly what he wants, exactly what the public wants, and exactly how to combine the two. I remember seeing him take a piece of paper to draw on it a sort of weather-chart of the ideal musical comedy. At one point it became hot, at another cold. There were moments of storm and moments of calm, and, of course, a strong cyclone hovered over the close of each act.

That seems to me a deadly method of procedure, but it is evidently the right one. Jimmie White has been forecasting the theatrical temperature for a considerable time, and he does not seem to have been very far out yet.

*Author's Note.* The proofs of this essay were already corrected when the stop-press announced the news of Mr. White's tragic suicide. In the light of that event the words written above may sound flippant. Yet, on the advice of one of Mr. White's most intimate friends, I leave them, feeling that they represent him as he was.

## LIX

MISS ELLEN WILKINSON, M.P.

*or*

A Study in Pink

‘THE lady is too expensive a product to maintain in a falling Empire.’

As she said these words she looked straight across the Harcourt Rooms, where we were having tea. Although she is a little woman, with a mild face and kind brown eyes, there was a certain ferocity in those eyes as they rested upon a lady – very much of a lady, too – who was ‘maintaining’ herself amply, if not expensively, on that curiously unpleasant form of tea-cake which one seems to find only in the House of Commons. But she was not referring to this particular lady. She meant Ladies – with a capital L.

For she had in her mind two pictures. They are such obvious pictures that I ask you to excuse me for pointing them out to you. They are the eternal pictures of extreme poverty and extreme wealth. The latter picture, though nobody could accuse me of riches, I knew well. The former I knew only by hearsay. Miss Wilkinson, who had just returned from the mining areas, drew it for me with a vivid, almost brutal directness. She is an honest woman, I would pledge my life on that. She told me things that made me shudder. And then, quite calmly, she referred to the ‘lady,’ as she

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

imagined. Well, her 'lady' was an extreme type. But, as I had to agree, she exists.

'I should not mind so much,' she went on, 'if the "lady" – using the word to indicate a type which we both agree exists – would even listen to the other side of the case. But the great majority of "ladies" whom I have met become absolutely hysterical when one begins to talk facts. They are like tigresses defending their young. They talk about "miners filling their baths with coal." They bring out everything they have ever heard about Russia, and repeat it, with eyes flashing and fists clenched. They will not listen – no, not for an instant. They actually shrink away from one – as though one was something positively unclean.

'Well, I realize now, though I did not realize it at first, that those women will fight for their comforts as desperately as the miner's wife will fight for her children. After all, what else can they do? The whole thing has its roots in sex. Take away from the "lady" her beautiful rooms, her exquisite clothes, her perfumes, her shaded lights, and what has she got left? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And she knows it. That is why she is so desperate.'

Again her eyes wandered over to the 'lady' she had observed before. I had a sudden vision of this lady fighting to defend her tea-cakes – which I am sure she would have done. The vision was a result neither of callousness nor of flippancy. It was one of those moments of semi-hysteria which attack one at any time when one is moved.

'You see the "lady" only really flourishes in de-

cadence,' she resumed. 'For instance, America is beginning to decay, and so "ladies" are springing up in hundreds. But they haven't got the real thing yet.'

'Yes,' I said to her; 'but don't you think that, even if you were to rebuild the world according to your heart's desire, you would still have the lady, in some form or another?'

'Not in a pioneer society.'

'But even in a pioneer society,' I persisted, 'a time would come when the forests were laid low and the land had been tilled and men could rest. And then you would have the Lady. You would have some women who, either because they were beautiful or because they were loved by the chief pioneers, would demand beautiful things, and leisure and adoration.'

She said something a little bitter then. But perhaps I won't repeat that.

Enough of this talk about 'ladies.' It gives, perhaps, a false impression of her, as though she were a sort of inverted snob. She is not. She is a clear-headed, business woman, quite fearless and utterly independent. She has, too, a pretty wit. I liked the way in which she described to me the position of women in the House of Commons.

'That a woman should wish to enter the House seemed, in the old days, a piece of super-coquetry, as though, having tired of flirting with a few men, she had made up her mind to flirt with six hundred, or even with the entire male population. That's all over now, thank goodness. We're treated exactly the same as men. The men were a long time in allowing us to come in,

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

but, now that they have allowed us, I must say that they've done the thing handsomely.'

And of herself:

'I am working class. All my people are weekly wage-earners. That is why I haven't really much sympathy with the people who don't work. I have a little flat. I do all the work in that flat, except for a charwoman who comes twice a week. I cook my own meals. I give luncheon parties. This morning, for instance, I was working hard at articles and speeches till nearly half-past twelve. I had five people coming to lunch at one. It was ready for them. It wasn't too much. Why should it be?'

By an ironic chance, I had to go straight from the House of Commons to a ladies' Conservative meeting. It was held in a very beautiful house. I was wafted to political discourse on cocktails and Rumpelmeyer sandwiches. I found myself in a Louis Seize room filled with old ladies in furs. Every sort of fur – chinchilla, sable, mink, fox, ermine. I had a curious feeling of being entirely surrounded by large woolly animals. The feeling was not dissipated when those ladies (who had probably never ventured east of Piccadilly, and had certainly never been in any mining area, except in a fast train on their way to Scotland) began, one by one, to rise to their feet and talk about the Empire, the necessity for combating Socialism, the importance of hard economic fact, and – oh, you know yourselves the sort of stuff that such people talk. One after the other they rose up. The air grew hotter. The lights seemed to blaze into my head. There was a languid war of

MISS ELLEN WILKINSON, M.P.

perfumes about me. Still the droning went on. And though never for an instant did I feel that a political system can be other than futile (whatever party label you may give it) – yet did I repeat to myself the opening phrase of this article, ‘The lady is too expensive a product to maintain in a falling Empire.’



## LX

P. G. WODEHOUSE

*or*

A Few 'Plums'

'THAT monkey,' said Mr. P. G. Wodehouse, in a firm and dispassionate voice, 'is wearing its clut colours in the wrong place.'

It was. The animal in question was a vast and obscene form of mandrill called George, which darted shamelessly in and out of its cage, snorted, turned its terrible multi-coloured back upon an outraged populace, and departed again, leaving everybody a little breathless and pale, and talking hurriedly about moving on to see the lions.

But P. G. Wodehouse did not hurry on to see the lions. Perhaps he was too fascinated by the reactions caused by George's anatomy upon the sedate families whom fate lured towards his cage. What are these families to say? George was evidently the work of God. But he was even more evidently obscene. How to reconcile these two distressing facts, especially when the originator of the problem was flaunting its provocation in one's face? I do not know the answer. But perhaps P. G. Wodehouse one day will, through the medium of laughter, give it to us.

And here, right at the beginning, I must warn you that this is to be no recital of Wodehouse epigrams on

the subject of animals. He made none. He merely gazed mildly through his glasses at all the specimens of beasts that came his way, offering them, throughout the course of an entire afternoon, the wrong sort of food, which, to his increasing pain, they rejected. But if you insist on knowing what he said, I can write it in a few lines.

1. Concerning the turtle he observed its resemblance to Mr. Leslie Henson.

2. Concerning the elephants, he noted that they appeared to be fully developed, both muscularly and aromatically.

3. Concerning the octopuses, he remarked that he would be pleased to see a beauty chorus of these monsters.

Apart from that he grew increasingly sombre and preoccupied. Perhaps that was because he could not find the snakes (for which he seemed to cherish an unnatural affection). Whenever there was a pause in the conversation he said, rather plaintively, 'I suppose there *are* snakes?' and the rest of us, who did not at all wish to see the snakes, remarked quickly that of course there were snakes, lots of them, but that they were a long way off, and just *look* at that lovely antelope. He looked, sighed, and said, 'Yes, it is a beautiful antelope.' But one knew that in his heart of hearts he cherished a fierce resentment against that antelope, simply because it was not a snake.

How dreadful it must be to have the reputation of a great humorist! I am sure that Wodehouse feels it. When I first met him, we were both lunching at the

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

House of Commons, and I noted that whenever he opened his mouth the faces of the politicians seated round him prepared to twitch up into set smiles. They were saying to themselves, 'Now he's going to begin. And when he did not begin, and behaved like an ordinary human being (although his conversation was more coloured and alive than that of most of us), they were quite disappointed. They looked as though they had been cheated – the brutes. I fail to see why. After all even if he does not make jokes, he is excellent company and he radiates charm. Best of all, he never talks about himself. If you wish to learn anything about 'Plum' (as I really cannot help calling him) you must learn it from his wife. And here, jotted down at random, are some of the things that one learns. . . .

*The Wodehouse Glide.* This refers, not to his prowess as a dancer, but to his almost uncanny capacity for disappearances. Whenever he finds himself at a party where the ground is a little too thick with millionaires or where too many peeresses are calling to their young or where the wits are warbling too shrilly, he disappears. There is no other word for it. At one moment he is there. At the next moment he is gone. Many legends have been invented to account for this capacity. Some say that he slides down the banisters. Others affirm that he carries a drooping moustache in his pocket which he affixes while blowing his nose. I have even heard it suggested that he secretes himself behind a curtain and makes a burglarious exit down the drain pipe. Whatever his method, he disappears. ^

These disappearances are really the key to his char

acter, which is dominated by a loathing for display. They enable one to understand the next mystery about him, which may be described under the heading of:

*Saturday Afternoons.* Every Saturday afternoon, Mr. P. G. Wodehouse disappears. For many years the reasons why he went, where he went, and what he did when he got there, were insoluble problems to his family. But they never inquired. There was a tacit understanding that they should not do so. He simply departed into space.

I am able, from a secret source, to throw light upon the problem of Mr. Wodehouse's Saturday afternoons, and I give the information with a strict sense of my responsibility to the future literary historian. *He goes to a football match.* There! It is out. Please do not follow him there. He does not want you at all. He wants to pay his sixpence, or whatever fee they charge one at these functions, and to enjoy the supreme English pleasure of standing in an icy wind watching a number of young men scramble about in the mud, while hoarse men breathe down his neck. I would give my soul to be able to like that sort of thing, because I cannot imagine a cheaper pleasure, nor one which so quickly sets one in tune with the rest of mankind. But I cannot.

The next fragment may be labelled:

*The Simple Life.* This is best illustrated by a brief anecdote. Before Plum was married, he lived in the country, working. One day a sumptuous gentleman called upon him to indicate that for a trifling fee he would confer upon him the benefits of insurance. Plum

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

said that he would be delighted to receive, and pay for, this benefit, and would the sumptuous gentleman accept a cigarette? He accepted a cigarette, and as he lit it he remarked:

‘I see you are just on the point of moving into this house. Where was your home before?’

Plum gazed at him blankly. ‘Moving in?’ he said. ‘What do you mean?’

The shadowy suggestion of a bum bailiff must have danced through the sumptuous one’s mind, for he answered a little tersely:

‘Well, look at this room.’

Plum looked at it. He saw a table and two deck chairs. Nothing else. He suddenly realized his shortcomings. It was an empty house, a house which would have caused Mr. Drage to rub his hands and grow lyrical over the prospect of men laying ‘lino’ (what is ‘lino,’ by the way?) free of charge. An empty house! Oh, Plum! Perhaps it was the company of your twelve dogs that had made you forget its emptiness for three whole years? At any rate, I understand that the sumptuous one departed in a huff.

Equally simple are his clothes. For the past two years there have been reposing at a famous tailor’s shop two suits of clothes marked ‘Wodehouse.’ One of them, in shape and colour, suggests Ascot. The other, by its rich blue and *chic* cut, indicates that one is meant to lounge in it. But Plum has neither strutted in the one nor lounged in the other. New clothes are a torture to him. Many men say that and do not mean it, taking a secret and unholy pleasure in preening themselves

before those fascinating triple mirrors which do such funny things to one's profile. But Plum really does mean it. Only some serious crisis will ever make him enter that tailor's shop again.

*Money.* I imagine that Plum makes quite a lot of money. He certainly deserves it. But I am quite certain that money to him means principally a curious and almost mythical product which enables one to purchase golf balls and books. After these essentials to life have been obtained, money is something which, when it arrives in large quantities, must be handed to one's wife rather as though it were an explosive. You will observe that I said 'in *large* quantities.' For when a cheque for, say, £3 6s. 9d. arrives (representing the royalties on two million copies of *Psmith, journalist*, in Vienna), that cheque is seized and sat upon by Plum, who would not be parted from it except by brute force. It goes to his own little private banking account, which never seems to rise much above a hundred pounds. He takes as much pride in this banking account as a child takes in its strip of garden, scattering in it a few golden seeds, which are promptly extracted again before they have had time to bear fruit, to see if they are still there.

Under the same heading of 'money' might be placed the final story which I am going to tell you about Plum, for it illustrates his complete guilelessness. The scene is the station at Southampton, the occasion of the arrival of the Wodehouse family from the United States. Mrs. and Miss Wodehouse are seated in their railway carriage, awaiting the arrival of Plum with a certain agitation, for the train is about to depart. At the

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

last moment Plum puts his head through the window. 'I don't think I shall come to London,' he says.

Mrs. Wodehouse gasps. 'You don't think you will . . . *what?*' Prospects of mountains of luggage, tame animals in the van, new houses, etc., etc., loom before them like a nightmare.

'No,' says Plum. 'I shall go to Emsworth and see - ' (naming an old friend). Upon which he did the Wodehouse glide, and so did the train.

Three days later, Plum arrived at the hotel where his family had ensconced themselves. The following adventures had occurred to him. He had been to Emsworth, and stayed with his friend. He had then, for the sum of twelve guineas, purchased a bicycle, and some bicycling clips. He proceeded to bicycle some seventy miles to London. Arriving at Hyde Park Corner, he suddenly realized that he was much fatigued, and fell off the bicycle. Perceiving in the distance a large hotel, he wheeled the bicycle to it, and demanded accommodation. The manager of the Hyde Park Hotel (for such it was) looked at him suspiciously and informed him that only the Royal Suite was vacant. On being assured that no Queens were likely to intrude upon him in the middle of the night, Plum engaged the Royal Suite, and entered it in his bicycling clips, followed by menials bearing stout and champagne. He then went to bed.

On the next day, he shaved, bathed, attired himself in his bicycling clips, and bicycled round London in search of a family. Having found the family, he presented himself. After a suitable reconciliation, Mrs. Wodehouse asked him where he had left the bicycle.

P .      G .      W O D E H O U S E

'Oh – that,' he said airily, 'I left it outside the Club.'

'Hadn't you better go and get it?'

He departed to get it. But he searched in vain. The bicycle had gone.

You see, the shameless one who took it did not know that it belonged to Mr. P. G. Wodehouse. The man who would steal from Plum does not exist. There ain't no such person.



## LXI

GEORGES CARPENTIER

or

Why do They do It?

IN Paris, in the Rue du Faubourg Montmartre, a flickering crimson sign flashes over the entrance to the Palace Theatre, announcing to the great American people that Georges Carpentier is appearing in a revue which bears the significant title *Femmes et Sports*. The sign appears to have an almost hypnotic effect upon the Americans, for they flock into the theatre in their hundreds, sweeping past the horde of insect-like attendants and filling the darkened auditorium with a tense chatter.

Upon me also the flickering sign had an almost hypnotic effect, for it persuaded me to join the throng and pay frs. 7.50 for a roving ticket. I cannot think of any other revue in Paris for which I would have paid frs. 7.50, because the asphyxiating atmosphere of these places gives me a headache for weeks afterwards.

However, here I was, standing in the hot scented darkness blinking at a lighted stage, waiting to see — what? An artist? Hardly that. A boxer? Certainly not that. A name? Yes, it must have been that. For nothing else could have kept me standing in that theatre. The revue was an appalling one. The sketches were

pointless and drearily vulgar. The music was vapid. Nobody had a voice.

The Name was a long time in appearing. I had entered the theatre at a quarter to nine, when the revue was already in full swing, and it was already nearly ten. On a long staircase, in various attitudes of graceless abandon, the company were posing themselves in what they evidently believed to represent an orgy. There were slaves and houris, nymphs and satyrs, pseudo-goddesses and pseudo-gods. The light flickered violet and distracting, sending out a hectic glow which illuminated the audience. The orgy, such as it was, whirled on faster and faster – and the steps were thronged with writhing, twisting creatures. Then suddenly, at the top of the staircase, appeared Carpentier.

He was smiling. He was dressed entirely in white, and really *dressed*, too. He ran quickly down the steps and stood in the centre of the stage. It seemed to me that he was hesitating. But I did not care, because he had altered the atmosphere of the whole thing. Not that he had made me feel at ease – on the contrary, he had made me feel more acutely uncomfortable than before. One had the feeling that some fresh, agreeable young man had unwittingly penetrated into the midst of a peculiarly unpleasant harem. He was vigorous and healthy – they were wilting and decayed. He belonged to the fresh air outside – they could flourish only in this poisoned heat. Why had he come here? What was he doing in the middle of it all? Somebody ought to tell him. He ought not to be there.

*He ought not to be there!* I did not know till after-

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

wards how strongly this feeling possessed me. For the moment, I, like the rest of the audience, was drawn by the magnetism of the very vivid personality.

See him as he stands there, a white-clad figure of superb health, smiling a little diffidently, and singing, in a light clear voice:

'La premier' fois que l'on fait ça  
Ça vous fait vraiment quelque chose  
On hesite, puis on ose  
Et pourtant c'est inoui, le trac qu'on a  
Mais p'tit a p'tit  
On s'en hardit  
Et l'on se dit, va, cours ta chance  
Mais l'on pense J'voudrais bien être ailleurs que là  
La premier' fois que l'on fait ça.'

A storm of applause bursts out as he finishes his number, but I cannot join in it. It is not that I do not appreciate the *tour de force* which enables a boxer to hold a sophisticated audience in a sophisticated revue merely by singing a song which has scarcely any melody and very little wit. I appreciate the miracle, and I appreciate the fact that Carpentier probably wants money and is perfectly justified in getting it, either in this way or in any other way, but I cannot help repeating to myself the line:

'J'voudrais bien être ailleurs.'

I, too, wished that he was elsewhere.

After the song there was a dance. The dance made me as miserable as if I were watching some lithe, harm-

less animal performing in a cage before a band of chattering fools. He did not dance so badly. He jumped with agility, he kept time, he had some neat, tricky little steps. But there are a thousand lounge lizards swaying down the corridors of a thousand Continental hotels who could have danced him off the stage. They could have given grace where he only gave strength. They could have been subtle where he was only simple, sinuous where he was only alert, and I had a feeling that he, too, knew this, that he was himself unhappy and that when he had sung that line,

‘J’voudrais bien être ailleurs,’

it had really been for him a *cri de cœur*. The *entr’acte* arrived and I went out into the fresh air. I wandered round the corner into a dingy little street, and discovered the stage door. I had not talked to Carpentier for two or three years. In those days, which seemed extraordinarily remote, I was a reporter on a weekly newspaper and had been sent to ask him to give me his views on the exceedingly delicate question of his looks. My editor had suggested to me that I should ask him if he would prefer to have been born ugly. It was not a particularly easy task, especially in those days, to approach a total stranger who happened also to be the heavy-weight champion of Europe and suggest that he might have been happier had he been plain, but I got through with it somehow, largely because Carpentier himself was so particularly charming and seemed anxious to make my task easier. I wondered if he would still be as charming as ever, and it was with a certain

## ARE THEY THE SAME AT HOME?

trepidation that I knocked at the door of his dressing-room. He was on the stage at the moment, they informed me, but would be back in about five minutes. I waited in the draughty corridor. Chorus girls fluttered by, like big, noisy birds; chorus men drifted past like animated wax models. There was a perpetual babel of tongues and swish of silks. Then Carpentier came along the corridor and greeted me.

He had not changed at all. He was as slim and elegant and smiling as ever. As of old, he gave the impression that he was merely a boxer *malgré lui*. And this impression was not lessened by the fact that, as we were talking, he was peering into a mirror, adding deft touches to his make-up.

Did he like it? He shrugged his shoulders. Yes, it was amusing. Something new.

Had they taught him to sing? No. They had taught him nothing. They had said merely, 'There is your song. Sing it.'

Had they taught him to dance? A few steps, yes. But very little. 'I had to do it all myself.'

He seemed to guess what was in my mind, for he switched round and looked at me with a sort of challenge. 'On m'a demandé en Amérique, on m'a demandé en Sud Amérique, on m'a demandé en Australie, en Italie, en Angleterre. On m'a même demandé en Allemagne.' After which, of course, there was nothing to be said.

Well, I am not surprised that they are demanding him all over the world. He has a charming personality, and he does as well as dozens of other musical comedy

## G E O R G E S     C A R P E N T I E R

stars. But for Carpentier, who has been a king, who has challenged the whole world in the greatest of games – for him to be merely ‘just as good’ – it seems a tragedy. This, I must repeat, is a purely personal impression. He does his present job well, and he is entirely right, I am sure, to do it. But I wish we lived in a world where our great fighters, our great lovers and our great crusaders were not pushed into the limelight of the theatre, to show us that, after all, they are only like ourselves.



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